

Adventures in Space and the World of Tomorrow

THRILLS

No 5.
9^D

INCORPORATED

SPACE PIRATES Inc.
by Durham Keys

DEVOURING COMET
by Ace Carter

PLUS MANY SHORT SPACE THRILLERS

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INCORPORATED

*Adventures in Space And
The World of Tomorrow*

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*Back from the future came a
superman who had a weapon
more powerful than death...
a weapon that doomed its vic-
tims to a living death!!*

WHEN Professor Elstan turned from his bench to get a piece of apparatus he needed for his work, Shor was standing there in the centre of the laboratory with nothing on.

The Professor was a thin, tired looking man who was probably no more than fifty years of age but he looked all of sixty. His stooped shoulders straightened slightly as he peered at Shor through thick-lensed glasses. There was an annoyed cast to the smile he gave the naked man. The sort of smile one might give to a welcome friend who has called at the wrong time.

"And what may I do for you?" queried the scientist mildly.

"I have work to do." Shor said quietly, his voice flat and without expression.

"Then might I suggest you get about it and leave me to mine," suggested Elstan with equal calm.

He was about to take up the piece of equipment he needed and turn back to his bench when he stopped suddenly, looked again at the man who had so suddenly ap-

her. When he didn't hear the door close behind the intruder he looked up again, rather more annoyed than previously. Shor was still standing in that same position but now his eyes were roving round the barn systematically, noting all the equipment and materials which were available.

He was a tall man of the high-browed, well feathered type and his age could have been anything from thirty to sixty. He was such an indefinable character that Elstan looked at him with more curiosity now. He couldn't recall ever having seen a man quite like him. What it was about him that made Shor so different Elstan couldn't be sure, but after a moment or two of consideration he decided that it was the complete lack of expression shown on his face. It was almost mask-like in its perfection of feature, and then only was it that Elstan noted that Shor's face was completely without hair, like a woman's; but Shor was most certainly a man.

"Well?" demanded Elstan irritably then. "Must I detain you? You should know

★ *Horror Thriller*
by **RON CONWAY**

ATOMIC

peared out of nowhere, and then pointed vaguely at a dust-coat hanging behind the door of the barn which was serving as his laboratory.

"You might put that coat on before you leave. I have a feeling Mrs. Mander might be rather shocked if she were to see you like that."

There was an amused smile to his lips as his thoughts dwelt for a moment on the possible reactions of his house-keeper to the sudden appearance of this man before

well enough that you'd be in serious trouble if the guards were to find you here. This laboratory is strictly secret. What with the threat of war with the east it's most essential that my experiments be completed. Now will you take the coat and leave quietly?"

"I have work to do," Shor said again just as coldly as before.

"Then for goodness sake do it and be gone," snapped Elstan testily. "How much more time must I waste on you."



SHE stood in shocked stillness as her eyes stared at the ghastly sight . . . The rigid body of the Professor had about it a luminous glow of life yet there wasn't a movement from him as the rats made their meal . . .

NEUTRALISER

"My work is here," replied Shor quietly.

"That's ridiculous!" snapped the Professor sharply. "I need no assistant and have asked for none. You have come to the wrong place. Now off with you."

"This is the place," replied Shor softly and then he moved for the first time.

There was a liquid sort of grace to his movements as he began to gather pieces of material and apparatus from the shelves and cupboards packed around the barn. Elstan was startled for a moment and then angry.

He couldn't see the funny side of such a practical joke as this.

"Put those things down and be gone," he rapped out sharply.

Shor ignored him and Elstan fished into the pocket of his laboratory coat and produced a small automatic pistol which fired tiny shells of surrender drug.

"All right!" he snapped at Shor then. "Put those things back and march for the door. I'm turning you over to the guard. I've had enough of this nonsense. And

put that coat on before you leave the laboratory."

"Put that toy away," advised Shor quietly, no trace of a change of expression on his face. "I have work to do and little time to accomplish it. I've no time to waste with you."

"Do as I say or I'll be forced to fire on you," warned the Professor doubtfully. Firing the will-snapping drug wasn't something he wanted to do but this fellow was forcing his hand. Why had the guards let him through their lines?

"So foolish of you!" said Shor mildly.

As he did so he stared hard into the depths of Elstan's eyes and the automatic fell from nerveless fingers as the Professor's whole body became rigid with his arms down straight at his sides. Without a second glance at Elstan, Shor picked up the rigid body and carried it over and leaned it in the corner of the laboratory out of his way.

There was no breathing, no pulse to record in that stiff body but somehow it seemed certain that Elstan still lived—as if in a suspended state of living. As if he had been suddenly subjected to a deep-freezing from which he could be later thawed whenever Shor chose.

But the man had forgotten the Professor apparently and he tinkered with the video apparatus for a time and added extra parts and disconnected several sections of the complicated apparatus. At last he began speaking into the microphone.

"Shor calling from minus three thousand," he said quietly, and then repeated this statement.

"Report at once," came a crackling voice back from the instrument.

"Am located in the laboratory of Professor Elstan as planned. All materials are available or capable of being muted from elements here. Will commence work immediately."

"Good work, Shor. Carry on. But what of the Professor?"

"Regret to report that it has been necessary to devitalize him temporarily. The interruption to his work should not affect our plans."

"Be most careful!" warned the voice from the other end. "We wish to leave no trace of our coming or going."

"I understand," replied Shor slowly.

"Shor signing off from minus three thousand."

When the instrument ceased to crackle Shor turned it off and began immediately to work with various pieces of equipment he had brought from the cupboards. His concentration on the task in hand became more and more intense as the hours wore on and Elstan would have marvelled at the things he was doing with elements like lead and iron.

From them Shor was muting various rare metals he found necessary for his work. It was twelve mid-night by this time and the light burned brightly from the special attachment above the bench. In the process of his work Shor found it necessary from time to time to use some part of the apparatus and he ruthlessly took the components he needed from the Professor's experimental set-up.

And so deep in concentration was he that he didn't hear the squeaking chatter coming from the corner of the room where he had propped the Professor so that he would be out of way.

It was Mrs. Mander, tired of waiting up with supper for the Professor, who finally noted the horror of it. Three large rats were fighting over the meal they were making from the Professor's left leg. Professor Elstan, unknowing, remained stiff and rigid. No blood flowed from the gnawed wound the rats made.

When Mrs. Mander, plump and smooth faced came bustling to the door of the barn to take her master to task for keeping her waiting she was fidgeting with her grey hair, contriving to make the bun more presentable. At the door she stopped and a long indrawn gasp of horror was the only sound she made. She stood in shocked stillness as her eyes stared at the ghastly sight.

The rigid body of the Professor had about it a luminous glow of life yet there wasn't a movement from him as the rats made their meal. Mrs. Mander stood a full minute before the high, shrill scream broke from her lips in one long shuddering screech of sound. It was enough to snap Shor from his concentrated work at the bench and his movements perked the woman's eyes in his direction. She caught one glimpse of his naked body above the bench and fled before Shor could act.

"Help! Help!" she cried in hysterical sobs of choking sound as she ran pell-mell toward the guards' quarters about a hundred yards away.

Shor knew that he would have to work fast now and switched the adjusted video apparatus on and called:

"Shor reporting from minus three thousand. Shor reporting from minus three thousand."

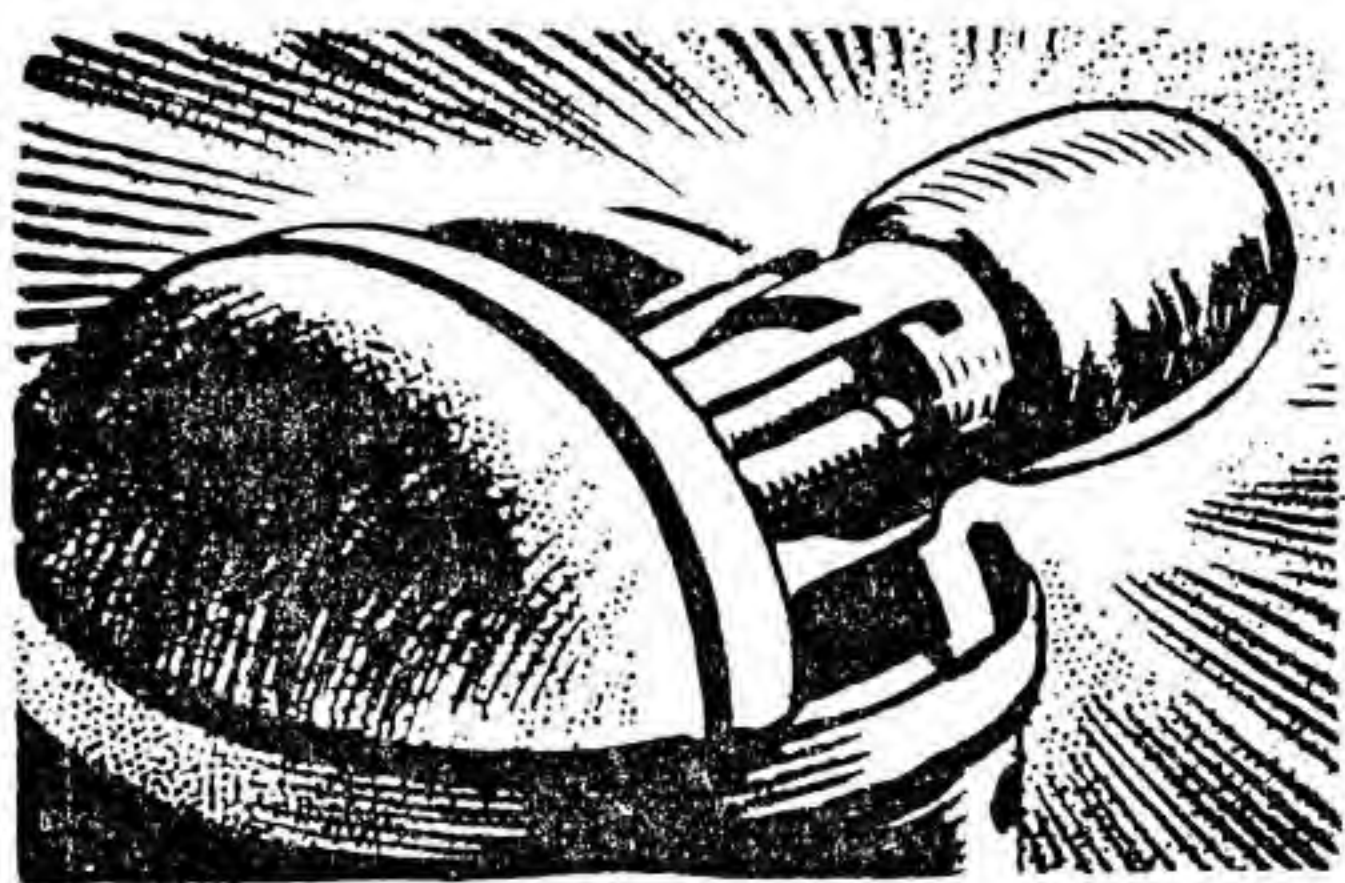
"Shor to report," a voice crackled from the instrument.

"Work incomplete! Have been discovered. Guards being called. What orders have I?"

"How much more time have you to complete assignment?"

"One hour," Shor reported back quickly.

"Very well!" snapped the voice tersely.



"You have it. Suitable adjustments have been made to the time apparatus here. Carry on."

"Shor signing off. Shor from minus three thousand signing off."

The instrument went dead and Shor returned to his work at the bench. He now had an hour before he would be disturbed again. When he looked at the clock on the shelf above the bench he realised that it was reading eleven of the night. A moment ago it had been registering twelve mid-night but no alteration had been made to the clock.

It was simply a matter of adjustment of the instruments at the control end which displaced him through one hour in time. But his naked flesh was all that could be displaced so that the equipment he was working on was completed to a stage where he'd left it at twelve mid-night but he was now working one hour earlier, having gained an hour of time he needed.

His complete concentration was shattered suddenly by the ear-piercing scream from the door of the barn and he looked up in time to catch a glimpse of the fleeing woman. She was plump and grey-haired and he guessed that she must be the housekeeper the Professor had spoken of. He could hear her screams as she fled and knew that the guards would be coming any moment. Eagerly, working against time, he checked the gadget he had made and then proceeded to muffle some lead into a silvery metal which he worked into a complete shell over his equipment so that the rectangular shape about the size of a foot-thing was completely sealed into a rough ball.

Just as he completed this he noted that three rats were eating a meal from the Professor and he rushed to the man and frightened the rodents away. Then he stared into the glazed eyes for a moment and Elstan was suddenly alive and agile and crying a little at the pain from the wound in his left leg where the blood now flowed freely.

Seeing the seriousness of the situation, the Professor found dressing and bandages in a kit kept for that purpose and began an effort to staunch the flow of blood from the wounds. Meanwhile, Shor had run to the door and saw that three guards were coming toward the barn laboratory at the double. He caught sight of the menacing weapons they carried and spun around and gathered up the small automatic with its shells of surrender drug.

Taking a quick glimpse of the gun he saw the obvious way to use it and returned to the door from where he sighted the guards now less than twenty yards from the barn. From behind the door he took rapid aim and fired a first tiny shell. Assured that it had found its target he loosed two more missiles just as accurately.

All three guards moved forward sluggishly now though no wound showed to reveal where the tiny shells had pierced their skins. They came like automatons, their movements sluggish and hands hanging limply at their sides, their weapons having fallen from them. When they reached the door Shor turned to the Professor and asked quickly.

"What do I do with these men now?"

"Make any command and they'll obey,"

replied the scientist truthfully, for he saw no point in lying to this strange creature who had so suddenly and inexplicably appeared in his laboratory. "How did I wound my leg?" he asked Shor then.

"I forgot you I'm afraid," Shor said calmly. "Three rats were making a meal from you."

A shudder of revulsion passed through Elstan and he backed away from the clean-faced stranger as if he didn't belong to Elstan's world at all, as if he had suddenly come from unknown parts. But Shor was busy gathering up the small sealed gadget he had worked on with such intense concentration during all the hours since he had suddenly appeared to take over the Professor's laboratory with his cryptic announcement that he had work to do.

"What's that you have?" asked the scientist curiously, feeling no pain now that he had given himself a shot of pain-sense antidote K3.

"The object for which I came to make," replied Shor calmly, the evasive answer only awakening the scientist's curiosity still more.

"And what purpose will it serve?" Elstan asked, the three guards standing sluggishly in the doorway all this time.

"It will make the inevitable future inevitable," replied Shor truthfully, but the answer only seemed to confuse the Professor who was considered one of the most brilliant men of his day.

"Please explain," he said humbly.

"It is simple," Shor spoke fluently. "The chain of events that form the pattern of time are inevitable down to the smallest detail—what you might call fate—but nevertheless, to ensure that this pattern is so, at certain points in history it is necessary that outside influences are set to work. All are preconceived in the pattern and so are nothing but a part of it."

"Then you would say that man can do nothing to provoke or prevent war?" asked the Professor solemnly.

"Exactly!" nodded Shor seriously. "The pattern is inevitable. If war is in the pattern of time at a certain point then it will occur whether or not men strive for and against it, since all these strivings are but parts of the pattern themselves."

"Then—since you claim to know so much—perhaps you could assure me that the east and west will not war one on the other with the civilization-destroying helium atom bombs."

"Strange that you should ask that. My mission in the pattern is to see that such a war did not take place. That is the reason for my labors, my appearance here."

"Why come naked and why do you speak of this war as if it were already past when it has not yet commenced?" queried the Professor.

"My transport will allow me to come with nothing but myself," explained Shor sombrely. "One gets used to it. For the rest—the war I have come to stop is in my past."

"But you're here," protested the Professor testily. "You're some ridiculous crank. I've stood enough of you."

"I am at minus three thousand from my day," snapped Shor, showing something approaching feeling for the first time. "That means that the war is past for me."

"You're claiming you have come from the future?" asked Elstan wonderingly.

"Precisely," admitted Shor.

"But such travel through time is a mere trick of the writers of fiction stories," protested the scientist desperately.

"I'm afraid not. I'm here aren't I?" queried Shor.

"Then it's ridiculous," spat out the Professor irritably. "You have come from the future to prevent a war which you already know has not occurred. What nonsense!"

"You misunderstand the concept of time," Shor replied patiently. "As I explained before—Time is a pattern, not a series of events one following another. Imagine it as a carpet woven in many colors with many threads. Then it is simple to see that to ensure a certain pattern at the one end a thread may have to be drawn from the other and woven through a myriad of other patterns, all simply to give the final desired design."

"Then . . ." began Elstan quickly.

"I have no more time," replied Shor coldly. "Think of a many hued carpet and imagine time as such an endless carpet. I can tell you no more. Guards! Bring an atomic rocket plane. I must deliver my

work to its rightful place before it is too late."

A new lease of life seemed to come into the men then as they saluted smartly and wheeled round with military and automaton precision. A few moments later an atomic rocket plane settled down just outside the door of the barn laboratory.

"I'll take this little gun," Shor told the Professor. "It maybe very convenient."

Then the naked man stepped through the door into the night and a moment later the drugged guards were taking him aloft in the ship.

Elstan was puzzled for a time but he soon was certain that the man was an impostor—a spy for the *east* who were planning a secret and immediate attack on the *west*. Once having decided that this was the logical explanation of the behaviour he ran to the video apparatus and switched it on.

"Elstan calling Group 9," he called urgently, fiddling with a dial which Shor had seen fit to cut out of the complicated circuit. "Elstan calling Group 9! Elstan calling Group 9!"

"Shor! Report in Shor! Who is that

fool meddling with our communications? Shor! Report in immediately."

"Shor has gone to deliver the thing he made," snapped the Professor, "and I'm not a fool!"

"Then stop interrupting our communications. Thanks for the report on Shor," crackled the voice in reply.

"Who are you?" queried Elstan curiously.

"Zero year for reorientation," came the incomprehensible reply. "You are minus three thousand."

"Hell!" snarled Elstan angrily then. "What will they think of next to bring confusion before attack."

Quitting the barn he hurried to the house where he found Mrs. Mander in a state of near collapse. But he glanced at her but casually as he hurried to the video equipment and repeated his call.

"Elstan calling Group 9. Elstan calling Group 9."

"Come in Elstan!" snapped a brisk voice through the speaker. "Screen yourself for identification."

Elstan turned the switch and knew that at Group 9 his face would be showing on

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the video screen. Then he was flashed an answering identification screening and Elstan spat out his urgent message.

"Have reason to believe that *east* is about to attack us," he sent quickly. "Suggest all preparations for the atomic-powered-pilotless helium atom bombs. Regret that my counter measure equipment is not completed."

"Message received! All precautions already taken. *West* has already dispatched large forces of the bombs you mention to pattern bomb the entire *east*. If ours reach their targets first we may have a chance of survival," came the terse reply.

Professor Elstan signed off then and switched to a general transmission wavelength and hoped to hear any progress that might come of the attacks believed to be already launched by both *east* and *west*. With the devastation area of each bomb being one hundred miles in radius a plan had been worked out so that a huge number of bombs could be launched simultaneously set for definite targets so that all devastation areas would overlap and so wipe out the whole civilisation of the *east*.

The tension that had mounted between the *east* and *west* was such that each suspected the other of planning annihilation and so both had tried to protect themselves by destroying the other. Now, whistling through the stratosphere, huge fleets of helium atom bombs were destined to destroy the complete civilizations of both *east* and *west*.

"Helium bombs have been falling over Metropolis territory for a half hour. All have so far failed to explode," came the joyous news from the video. "Here is a screening of one such monster."

And onto the screen flashed the huge helium bomb zooming down under the atomic power of its rocket tubes and then shattering harmlessly into the earth with nothing more than a crash of splintered metal.

"The authorities announce that our bombs are already launched to pattern-bomb the *east* from existence," a further report came. "No western bombs have so far landed on enemy territory."

"Attention! Attention!" cried a voice over the video. "The *east* offers unconditional surrender to the *west* if the helium

bomb raid is recalled," the heavily accented voice cried.

It was obvious that the *east* knew of the complete failure of their helium bombs and were now completely at the mercy of the bombs of the *west*. The voice had been that of the Chief High Officer of the *east*.

Then, a few minutes later, another voice broke the video silence with the reply to the *east's* surrender terms.

"The terms of surrender by the *east* are accepted by the *west*. All helium bombs have been ordered back to base. Attention! Bomb destined for your Metropolis One is not responding to signal. Take precautions."

But it was too late to take precautions and the people of *east's* Metropolis One stood in the streets and watched the helium bomb zooming down from the skies over the city. There was the fascination of the lost hope in watching that dreadful missile zoom closer to them. It struck the ground with terrific force and the whole thing was shattered asunder but there was no explosion.

"*East* calling *West*. We are withdrawing surrender terms. Your helium bombs are equally ineffective with ours. Suggest conference to bridge differences."

"*West* agreeable!" was the terse reply.

Elstan relaxed back away from the video apparatus where he had been crouched and his mind suddenly flashed to Shor who had said that events would be such. But how could a small gadget, made in the space of a few hours, and sealed in a small rectangular metal container possibly neutralize all atomic explosions on earth? How could it be?

But when Elstan thought back to that vaguely distant past time when the first atomic explosions were made he knew that the advancements since then were such that the future must be crowded with amazements for the scientist. And slowly he began to understand what Shor had meant. Without the atomic neutralizer at work civilization would have been destroyed and there could have been no future for man. So out of the future had come a man with a way to ensure the reality of the future from which he came.

Right then Elstan knew that he had a tremendous task to perform for science. He had to detain Shor and see that he revealed

his scientific secrets for the benefit of Elstan's age.

Already there was this new concept of time—the idea of pattern which made time travel reasonable. There must be much more. Hurriedly he contacted Group 9 and they agreed to assist. Though his explanation of Shor was wildly reckless since he didn't understand it fully himself, Elstan had managed to convey a pressure of sufficient urgency to set Group 9 acting.

When the atomic rocket plane settled gently down outside the barn laboratory, Shor stepped out and he was without the object he had been so anxious to establish at its rightful place, and there was a relaxed weary expression breaking through the cold and expressionless mask. Shor was well content with his activities and it did not detract from his achievement to know that it had to be in such a fashion that things happened.

All he wanted now was the safety of his return to his own time and the rewards he would receive there by way of honors and titles for his weaving of an important thread in the carpet of time.

"Halt!" called a group of voices from all around him in the night.

"Who is that?" Shor demanded calmly, seemingly unafraid.

"Elstan and some friends," the Professor replied calmly. "We have decided that we are not allowing you to return to your own time. You have too much of value to us."

"Guards!" called Shor calmly. "Open fire!"

The three guards in the rocket plane, under the influence of the surrender drug, opened fire on the force of Group 9 and Elstan moved calmly toward the barn laboratory.

"The use of the surrender drug on me would ruin me for your purposes," he called. "Too. You daren't risk shootin' for the wound might not be a minor one. The guards will keep you occupied while I retire quietly."

But suddenly the guards were no longer active for Elstan had failed to mention that the surrender drug produced final collapse and death after a relatively short time. The sudden burst of activity had hastened this in

the case of the three affected by Shor's shooting.

Immediately the Group 9 men who still remained alive rushed with Professor Elstan into the barn and in a moment they were swarming all over Shor as he worked at the video apparatus he had adjusted.

"Shor reporting from minus three thousand," he cried as he fought off three attackers desperately. "Shor reporting! Get me out of this. Mission complete."

But slowly he was dragged away from the apparatus and tied. Then, with Elstan sitting directly before him the men from Group 9, the scientific branch of the *west's* defences, began to ask their questions eagerly and Shor squirmed under the utter futility of trying to explain his knowledge to such fools as these men who passed for scientists in this age.

At his present position the time-device in his own day would not pick him up and so he knew that he had to be free. Besides, the pattern demanded that no record be left of his coming, or his going. Thus it was in the pattern of things.

Slowly his eyes burned deeply into Elstan's as he caught his eye. The Professor went rigid and life was held in abeyance. Then, using all his cunning, Shor manoeuvred each of the others into a suitable position and within five minutes they were all tense and rigid and only one flaw remained in the plan. He himself was tied down and helpless.

He called loudly and at last Mrs. Mander came and this time she checked her shock for the man's eyes caught hers as she came through the door and she moved closer to him and he uttered his order. The glazed eyes of the woman stared back into his as her hands worked the knots loose and he was released. Then, sitting the woman down in the chair he bent the power of his will on her through his eyes and she stiffened into rigidity like the others.

"Shor ready for return," called the man into the video.

"Shor about to return," the voice came back.

A few moments later Shor was whisked through three thousand years in an instant. The last thing he heard in the barn laboratory was the hungry squeaking of many rats.

Clive Krane set out to capture the cleverest gang of inter-planetary hi-jackers ever known . . . Pirates who attacked from nowhere and then vanished into space . . .

CLIVE Krane turned away from the window marked "Venus Transport" and faced the ISP official across his desk.

"From the time you leave this office, you'll be in deadly danger," the official said. "We aren't dealing with occasional cases of space piracy. This is a well organised group of saboteurs, pirates and assassins backed by a ring of powerful and unscrupulous men, some of them in high places——"

Krane laughed harshly. "Doesn't sound like a rest cure. Why'd you pick me for the job?"

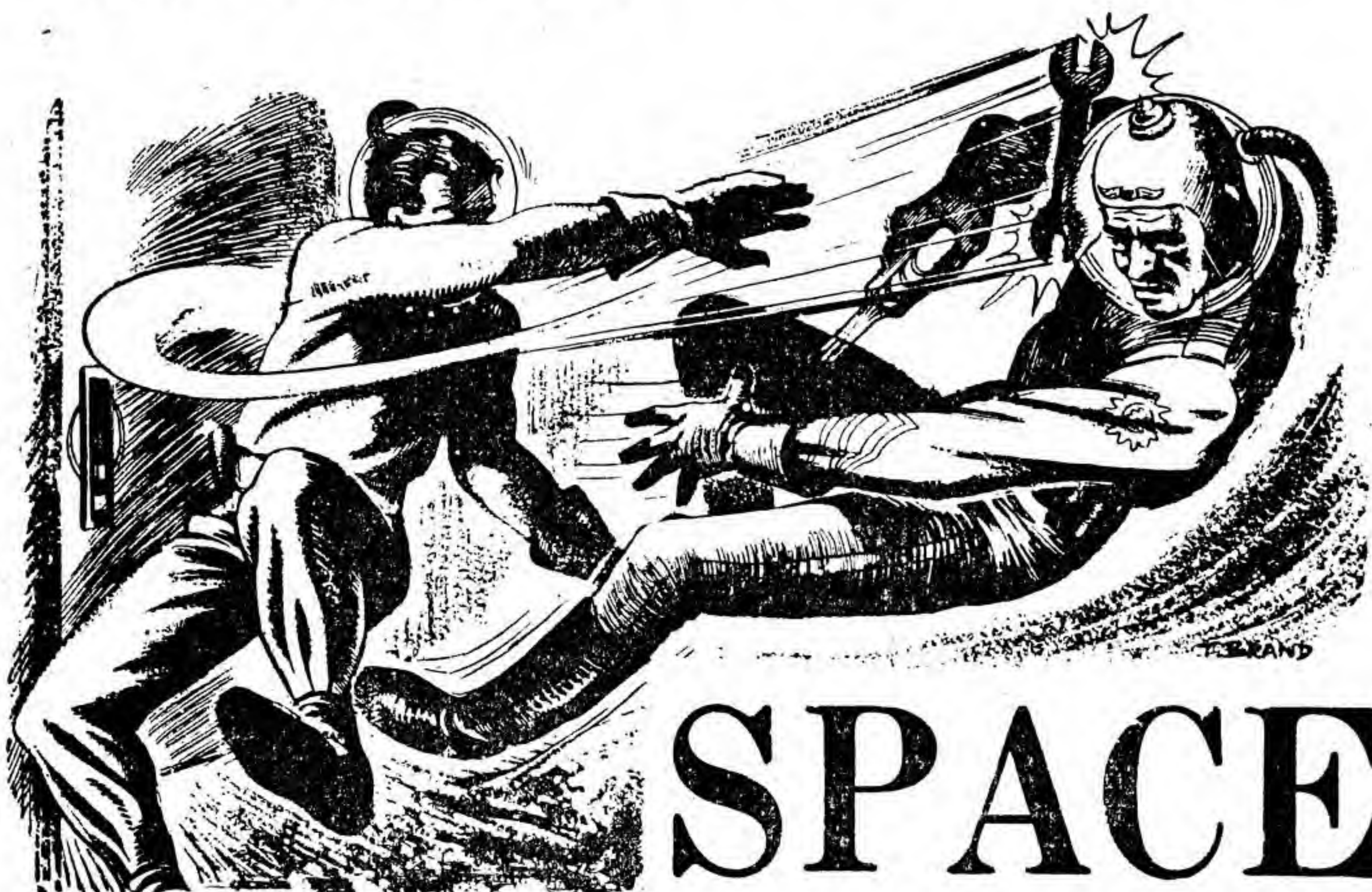
"You were recommended by the Ministry of Transport. Also you were transferred from the Mars-Jupiter sector because you are unknown here. Any other regular ISP men would have been recognised at once. Our original idea was to place you aboard a transport as a crewman to spy out the weak links in our defensive

measures. But a matter of graver importance has come up. The assignments will overlap, but we can no longer give you any official backing."

"You'd better bring me up to date," said Krane bluntly.

"The pattern is usually the same, Barratry. Three of the Venus transports have been deliberately wrecked and looted. Of plutonium for the most part. Members of this criminal group have been among the crew. Even trusted officers have been made to assist the plotters by the use of blackmail or other methods. We can trust no one, not even the captain. Two days ago we arrested a man on a charge of barratry. We had no name, only a heliophoto from Venus. In his possession we found documents of vital political importance. Release of this information could cause chaos—even war."

He caught a glimpse of the blaster in Hamlin's hand . . . he spun round and hurled the wrench in one motion, but Hamlin had already pulled the trigger . . .



Krane grunted. "Such documents have no right to exist."

"I agree. Unfortunately, this one does exist, and it's no longer in our hands. A woman, obviously an accomplice, got a blaster gun to our prisoner. Two ISP were killed, and the prisoner escaped. The documents went with him. Both these fugitives must be caught and killed, and those papers must either be brought back or destroyed. That's your job."

"I don't like it. And I don't like working out of uniform."

"You weren't asked if you liked it. With two black marks against your record, you can't afford an opinion. One more and you're through as an officer of the space patrol——"

"I still don't like it."

"I wouldn't count too much on your friendship with Paul Hall, if I were you, Krane. He's through here—even if he was kicked upstairs into the Transport Ministry. We no longer approve his methods. His rough shod, undisciplined methods may get by in the frontier civilisations like those of the outer planets, but nowadays we require efficiency. The time is past when the ISP man can forget to change his uniform and go without shaving for days at a time."

Krane's eyes glittered. "There was more to Paul Hall than pretty braid and a uniform. He was a man. For your information those black marks on my record are for tearing apart superior officers who made cracks about Paul Hall. Do you want me to turn in my badge?"

"What's the matter, the job too tough for you?"

"Listen," snapped Krane, "the jobs don't come too tough. Relax, Big-Shot. I'll run your stinking little errand for you. But it's the last one. When I hand your bad-man over to you, I'm through. Make out my resignation that way and I'll sign it before I leave."

"Right," the official threw a card across

the desk. "There's the man you want. That picture won't help you much, since he'll probably be wearing a plastic face mask."

Krane glanced at it and shrugged. "That's not much to go on. Any other leads?"

"Yes." The official glanced at his wrist-chron. "We know that he will be on the Venus Transport X-1186—the 'Astronaut'—which leaves in three hours. Probably the woman too. Whatever happens they must not reach Venus alive."

"And remember," added the official, "the 'Astronaut' is an unarmed emigrant ship. There will be a space patrol following you. If you strike any trouble, signal them—by helio flash if possible—and they'll come running. I suggest you contact the man first, and through him find the woman. Oh, yes, your friend Paul Hall will be aboard and you can contact him if you feel like it."

"Have you figured out how I'm to get on the 'Astronaut'? If she's an emigrant ship, they'll take only married couples. The company wants settlers to colonise Venus and build up their plantations for them."

"That's your problem. Marry someone if you have to, or hire a fake wife. It's been done. Now get going. You've got less than three hours to take off time."

THE bee-hive activity of the ticket office slackened off as take-off time drew near. The nuggety little booking clerk behind the grill was tired, and his tone of long suffering patience had worn to a thread of annoyance.

Clive looked fondly at the little man over the heads of the surging crowd. It wasn't so long ago that Art Grogan had been one of the best Chief Engineers in the ISP Rocket Service. Five years ago the ship both he and Clive were serving on had been jumped by a small fleet of pirate craft near Saturn. In the victorious fight which followed Art had been maimed for life when a blaster beam had seared his ship. Clive had risked his ship to nurse the little man

... *by* ...
DURHAM KEYS

PIRATES INC.

back to life, and he knew that Art had never forgotten. Needless to say, the ISP had dropped Art like a ton of bricks after according to him an ironic hero's send-off.

The person in front of Krane hurried off and he was able to approach the window. "Lo Art," he grinned. "Got a pair of tickets for a foot-loose space-man who wants to get to Venus in a hurry?"

Art looked up and a genuine smile of welcome lit his face as he recognised the lean figure at his window. "The same old Clive," he grinned. "Guess you know I can't sell tickets to anyone but married couples. Still, if I know you, a little thing like that won't stand in your way for long, eh?"

"How right you are. In less than half an hour one Clive Krane expects to be hitched . . . but only for a glorious two weeks." He laughed aloud at the look on Art's face. "Well, can you fix it, you sawn-off space rat?"

"You're in luck," Art answered. "This is the last pair of tickets for the entire ship, but I warn you, Clive . . . you'd better have your papers, and a wife, when you try to get past the purser."

Clive waved his thanks and good-bye's as he walked off in the direction of the nearest honky-tonk in search of a floozy who he could persuade to fall in with his plans after waving a roll of notes in front of her nose.

The figure of a girl that had been standing behind Krane during his conversation with Art hesitated a second, then hurried after him and tapped him on the shoulder. Clive turned and saw a young girl, expensively dressed, almost too well groomed with honey blonde hair, a haughty manner and an icy stare in her violet eyes.

Ignoring his look, she rapped out: "I'll give you a thousand for those tickets."

"Not even if you said please."

"Please, and two thousand."

"Stop it. You're getting too near my price. Besides it wouldn't do you any good. You need a husband to go with them."

"Three thousand."

Clive whistled. "You must need them pretty badly. Look, I'll make a deal with you. I'll sell you half of my double for one thousand five hundred, providing you marry me."

"Marry you." There was a note of loathing in her tone.

He turned away. "Forget I mentioned it.

If I'm to be stuck with a girl for three months—I don't want it to be you."

"You win—I guess I'll do even that."

Krane laughed wickedly. "Don't flatter yourself. You're just a ticket to Venus for me. Meet me in the marriage bureau in half an hour. We haven't much time, and you'll have to be psychographed. By the way, I'm Clive Crane.

"I'm Noni Moore—in half an hour."

The rocket transport left its runaway at an angle of 45 degrees, slanting up into the silent night with a blossom of pink-white flame flowering around the bell-shaped stern jets. The warning alarms ceased their blaring, and the series of muffled vibrations smoothed to a muffled burr.

Krane hunched himself off the shock-couch and looked over towards the girl. He saw that she was out cold. He crossed the cabin in quick strides and picked up her purse and went through it methodically. The only thing that interested him was a small photo in an ivory frame of the man whose face was on the Security Headquarters dossier card. Krane neutralised the charge in her blaster—also found in the bag—and replaced everything as he had found it. He wished that he had a pocket magnascope to study the color photo in detail, but that could wait. He must check the passenger lists and find where Paul Hall's room was located. Paul would have to be warned so that his surprise at seeing Krane would not give the game away.

The girl stirred and moaned feebly. Krane found the emergency medical locker and forced an anti-acceleration capsule between her tight clenched teeth, following it with a water concentrate capsule. She would be wildly thirsty when she came out of it, and real water would have some very unpleasant effects during A-shock. He leaned over and checked the straps. They were tight enough so that she would never get out of them without help. Her eyes blinked open as she stared at him in panic.

"Just relax," he cautioned. "And don't be impatient. I'll be right back. Have to see a man about——"

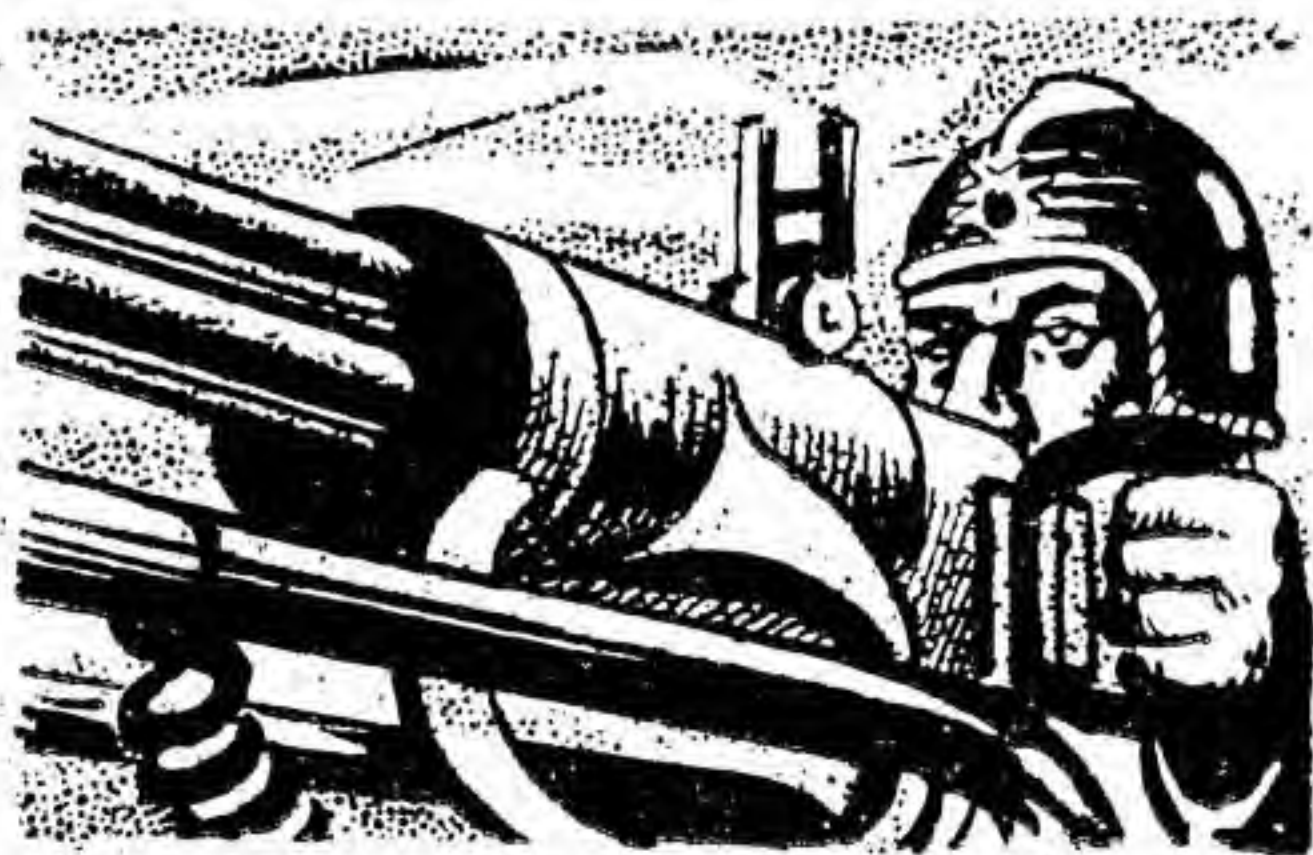
He went outside and made his way with difficulty up the bleak passage forward. The distorted gravity made walking extremely difficult. Once outside the main gravity field of earth, artificial gravity fields would be turned on. Until then only an experi-

enced spaceman could get around with certainty. Krane was grateful for the rigorous training of the ISP.

A staccato bark of unintelligible verbal commands came through the door of the control room ahead. The captain's office should be somewhere about here. On Krane's right was a closed door marked "Captain." Krane knocked twice without receiving any answer, then tried the door. It slid open easily. He stepped over the high threshold, and the sight that met his eyes brought an involuntary gasp to his lips.

Sprawled forward, half across the desk, was the captain's body. The upper part of his head had been blown away by a blaster gun, evidently fired at close quarters.

A cry from behind swung Krane around. In the frame of the open door-way stood the purser, mouth open, pointing at the dead man with a trembling finger. Instinc-



tively Krane started for the door. The purser sprang into action, leaped on Krane and caught him in a surprisingly strong grip for so slight a man. Krane made no attempt to struggle. In a moment the office was full of people. The burly first mate pulled the purser away from Krane.

"What's all this, Hamlin?" the mate demanded.

"I heard a sound in the Captain's office and when I came to investigate I found him," Hamlin explained. "The captain's been murdered."

Mate Harriman looked Krane up and down. "Where's the gun?" he barked.

"How should I know? I just came up here a minute ago. He was like this when I got here."

Harriman drove a fist full into Krane's mouth. "Come on. You don't expect us to believe a yarn like that. Where's the gun?"

Krane spat blood from his mangled lips.

"I don't know anything about it. I came up here to check the passenger list, and was told back at the space port that I should have to see the captain."

The purser nodded agreement.

"I want to see the first mate," Krane said.

The words seemed to recall Harriman to his duties. "I'm the first mate," he said. "I haven't time to bother with you now. I'll take care of you later. Throw him into the locker rooms. I'll have to take over for the Old Man."

Krane had been flung into the cramped quarters of the ship's locker room more than a day ago, when Hamlin come in and sat down.

"You're in a bad spot, Krane. It's customary in cases of civilian infractions of ship's rules to appoint an officer as council for their defence. I'm yours. They're giving you a hearing in the wardroom. I'd suggest you co-operate with me by telling me anything that will help in your case. I don't mind telling you that your story's too weak to hold up. I'll do all I can for you, but you'll have to help."

"What am I supposed to do?" Krane grunted.

"You might tell the truth. We know that the Captain was killed just as the ship took off. If you can prove that you were somewhere else at the time——"

"I was with my wife. She can bear witness for me."

"It won't do, Krane. I should have told you before that your wife is ill. I found her myself strapped to the bunk in your cabin, Martian plague. I called the doctor, who examined her, then quarantined the cabin. We left concentrated food and water, warned her not to leave, then locked and sealed the cabin. No one can see her."

Krane went cold with anger. "Someone must really be trying to foul me up," he raged. "She couldn't have the Martian plague—she's never been off the earth."

"Your papers read that you came from Mars," corrected Hamlin.

"I did. We were married just before the ship left. If I were carrying the plague, I'd have it myself. She couldn't have it——"

Hamlin laughed nervously. "I wish I could convince the doctor of that. He's been taking blood tests of me ever since we left her. I'm sorry for you, Krane, but she has it. I saw the grey rash myself. It's horrible——."

Krane's mind worked like lightning. "What am I charged with?" he asked.

"Deliberate murder and plotting against the welfare of the ship. If the officers agree on your guilt you can be put through an airlock immediately. The regulations have to be pretty stringent on a space-ship."

Krane stood up. "Let's go up and get it over with," he said. "We'll see about your regulations."

The assembled officers stared at Krane curiously. His lip was still bruised and swollen. He stared insolently at the group and concentrated on the immediate hurdle in order to get out of this mess. Harriman wet his lips and opened the hearing.

"I won't waste words when we all know why we're here. The Captain of this ship was foully murdered, and this man who calls himself Clive Krane was found standing over the body. There was no gun in the room and none on the prisoner. His papers seem to be in order, but may be forgeries. That can be checked. His wife is in quarantine, and unable to testify one way or the other."

Krane broke in. "I demand to hear the formal charge against me."

Harriman read the charge much as Hamlin had already guessed downstairs.

"Good, now I make formal demand that my wife be called as witness."

"You heard me say that your wife was in quarantine. She will not be able to testify. If you have anything else to say in your defence, speak up."

"I make no defence. I will stand on my civilian rights as a technicality. This court has no jurisdiction over me. The most you can do is to confine me to this ship until a charge can be brought against me in an Admiralty Court in Venus. Also, under Security Law No. F 1720, since the one witness I have asked to have called in my defence has not appeared in court, I demand that the whole hearing be dropped as illegal."

Harriman's jaw dropped. "Do you expect to get away with this?" and then in momentary desperation he glanced around the room at the circle of faces and saw that Krane had him over a barrel. The hard-faced astro-navigator spoke up. "Better send for Hall—he's from the Ministry of Transport and should know the correct procedure."

The officers remained silent while Paul was called. When he arrived the situation

was explained to him by Harriman in a monotonously levelled tone of repressed fury.

"Well, gentlemen," said Paul Hall, "as far as I can see the prisoner is within his rights. Even if the circumstances are unusual, we have no alternative but to release him. However, I recommend that he be under the constant watch of some competent officer. Once Venus has been reached the man can be turned over to the proper authorities."

Krane broke in roughly: "Does all this monkey talk mean that I'm free?"

Harriman was maliciously official. "I'm afraid it does, Krane. But don't try anything funny. Hamlin and Nalson, I'm detailing you two to watch over Krane in shifts. If he tries anything—shoot him. Since he has no room he will share yours for the remainder of the voyage."

Hall glanced at him with an odd expression. "If the acting-captain has no objections, I'd like a word with Krane in private."

Harriman was curious, but nodded. "Are you sure you'll be safe with him?"

Hall smiled. "That's my worry. After twelve years in the space patrol, I'm used to handling bad boys."

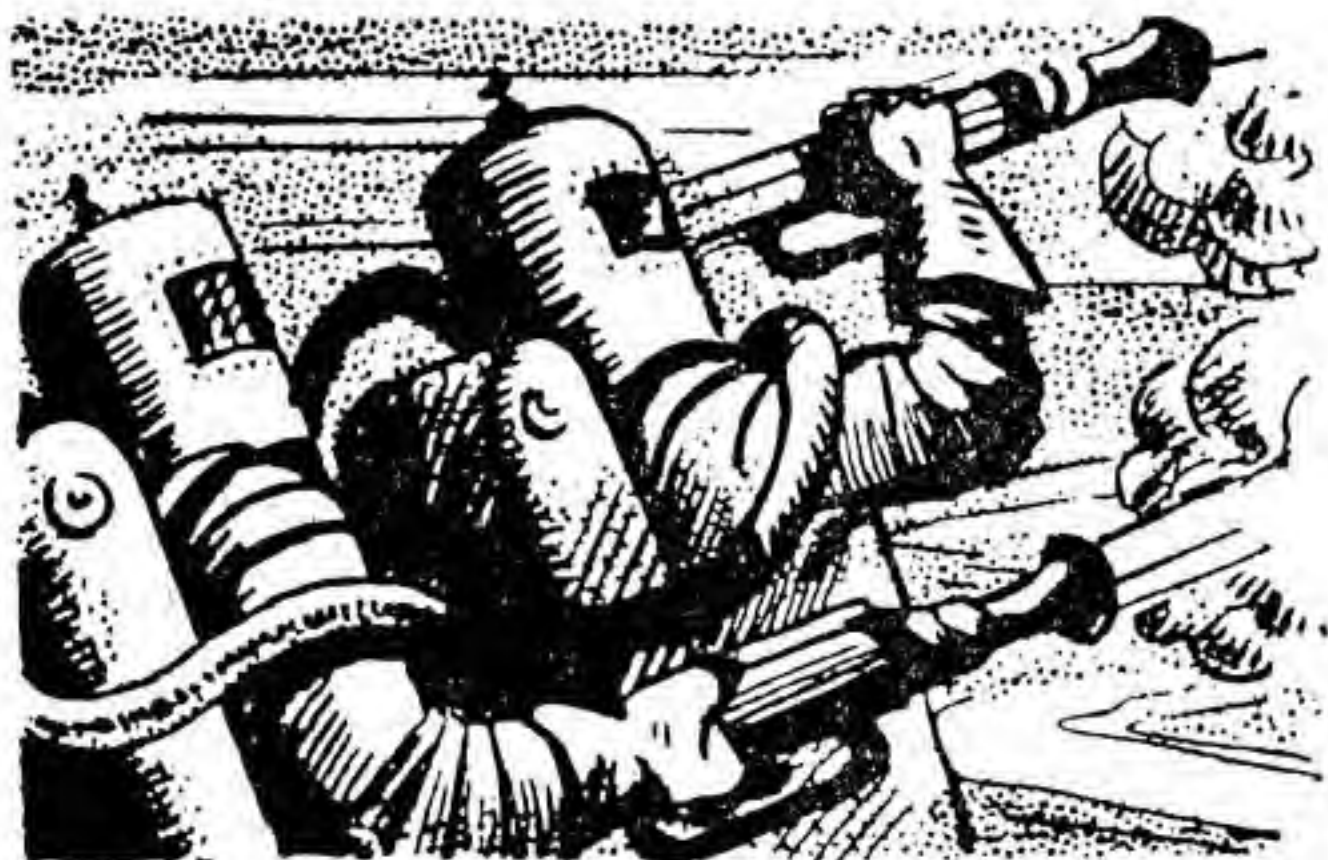
Nine days out the "Astronaut" ran into trouble. Proximity alarms blared wildly. It was only a small asteroid, not more than a quarter of a mile in diameter, just a jagged piece of rock and fused metal. But it came out of a direct line with the sun, moving fast, and discipline had been dangerously lax after Harriman had taken over command.

At 9.05 ship's time, there came the sound of a rending crash up forward, followed by a nauseating sense of shock and withering waves of motion energy transformed into heat. Fortunately, the collision was a glancing one, but enough. The spacer was a shattered wreck. Her bow and the control room were carried away bodily, and only the space tight bulk-heads of the waist saved the passengers and crew from instant death.

At 9.20, far off course, leaking air dangerously from sprung seams, the doomed transport and the asteroid circled each other like wary wrestlers awaiting an opening. Sooner or later as the initial force of the spin died down, they would crash together in a flaming holocaust. In the meantime all that could be done was being done.

Orders went out to abandon ship. Of the original complement of 480 passengers and crew, 19 were dead or missing, and 80 others more or less seriously injured. The heaviest casualties were among the rocket crew and officers, some of whom were fatally burned by premature atomic discharge. Rocket jets were set roaring at full capacity in a vain effort to break the transport away from the deadly vicinity of the circling asteroid. Surviving crew members labored heroically to load and launch the life-rocket-boats from three airlocks, two which were so badly jammed as to be almost unworkable.

The forward compartments were a scene from an inferno. Krane who had been with Nalson in the chartroom when the crash occurred, picked himself out of the jumble of broken lockers and scattered metal-leaf



charts and crawled through the glare and heat to a pitiable huddle of pulped flesh pinned beneath the wreckage of a beryllium table. Nalson's skull was fractured. Blood pumped from his ears, and he was gasping out his life as Krane pried the table away. His eyes seemed to be bursting from his head.

"No excuse for wreck," he got out. "I'm Security Police—sent me in case you fumbled. Watch Harriman—Hamlin."

A spurt of blood from his mouth and nose stopped his words. He spat savagely. "Think . . . Hamlin's . . . the man you want." His lips continued to move weakly, then hung open as he died.

USING a leg of the ruined table as a wrecking bar, Krane pried open the door and got into the passageway. A blast of sickening heat rushed to meet him. Forward was a lurid glare of white hot metal, and he could hear air shrieking through the leaks where seams had started. He fought

his way aft to a bank of elevators, but they were hopelessly jammed.

Descending the spiral staircase, he encountered Paul Hall.

"I thought you were a goner," Hall said. "The entire forward of the ship seems to be carried away."

"It is. I'm hard to kill. Nalson's dead. And so are the men in the control room."

A kind of exhilaration moved in Krane. The endless watching and waiting under constant surveillance had gotten on his nerves. He was not used to intrigue. Now that a need for his kind of action had arisen, he felt better already.

Hall's left arm had a compound fracture above and below the elbow. It hung at his side with splinters of bone thrusting through mangled skin and flesh. Krane broke open a locker and gave him emergency first aid, binding the limb with metal splints.

"That'll hold it till you can get it cared for. You'd better get to the lifeboats. I'm going to find my wife. As I told you, she might be in this racket, but I can't be sure. In any case she's my responsibility."

"Can't I help?" Hall asked.

"Not now. If I make it, we'll discuss it there. If not, you can relay a message for me. There's an ISP Squadron 6 hours behind us. Get a helioflash to them, telling them to come a-running. I've an idea they'll find something interesting."

"I'll get word to them," Hall promised. "Take care of yourself, boy." The door of stateroom No. 200 was still locked and sealed. Krane opened a locker and got out a wrench to open the lugs on the hinges. A voice from behind jarred him.

"I've been looking for you," Hamlin sneered. "I thought you'd be up to something." In the dimming and flaring light Krane got a glimpse of the blaster in Hamlin's hand. Krane's fingers tightened on the wrench. He spun round and hurled the wrench in one motion. Hamlin pulled the trigger, but the wrench spoiled his aim. Krane dodged under the beam and dragged him down in a flying tackle. The gun went rattling down the corridor.

"Come away from there, you fool," Hamlin screamed as he broke away. "D'you want the plague?" He edged towards the fallen gun, but Krane cut him off. Both lunged for it. Krane got to it first, but before he could use it Hamlin kicked him

in the stomach. He rolled on the floor in agony. Hamlin kicked again viciously. Krane fumbled with the gun.

A warning alarm sounded. The boats were about to leave.

Krane got his breath back. "Help me to get her out. She's no more got the plague than you have. Besides, she's your——"

"You're mad," Hamlin shrieked. "They'd never let her into the boats. I won't risk the lives of innocent people on your say-so." He leaned across Krane to snatch at the gun. Krane clawed at his face and layers of plastic came off in his fingers. Hamlin screamed as the synthetic pulled loose from his flesh. Then he turned and ran.

He darted up the companion stairs, and by the time Krane could reach for the blaster it was too late. The man had vanished to the upper gallery.

Krane got to his knees and aimed the blaster at the lock on the state-room door. The mechanism and half the door disappeared in a ravening violence. The shock knocked Krane flat.

Noni stepped through the shattered doorway.

"What's going on?" she wailed hysterically.

"Never mind that. We've got to get you out of here. Are you all right?" She laughed wildly. "Of course I am. Has everyone gone crazy? You look a fright. Do you want to carry me—or shall I carry you?"

"Get to the lower decks. Find the doctor and show him you're not sick. And hurry—the lifeboats are leaving." And seeing that she hadn't moved, he raged "What are you waiting for. If you don't hurry it will be too late."

She answered with a quiet assurance. "Listen, tough guy, you didn't have to come back for me. D'you think I'd leave you to save my skin after that?"

"All right, if you want to play the big hero—have it your own way." Krane shook his head to clear it of the mists of a dizzy weakness. "Let's get going," he urged. "If the lifeboats leave before we reach the air-lock, you'll really be in jam."

They rushed together to the sally-port. The air-lock door was closed. "The boats have gone," he said. He sat down hopelessly on a casket-like metal toolbox.

"Maybe someone will come," she said.

"That's just what I'm afraid of," he snapped.

"What do you mean, that's what you're afraid of? Who would come back?"

"Don't you know?"

She shook her head in bewilderment. "How should I know. I'm a stranger here myself."

"You may as well stop playing innocent. In case you don't already know, I'm an officer of the Space Patrol sent to prevent——"

"You act as if I knew something about all this," Noni cut in. "I don't know why you should think so, but you're way off the track. Why suspect me?"

"How can I help it with that picture in your purse, and that phony Martian plague act?"

"I—I can't explain about the picture, but the other I had nothing to do with. While you had me tied up, someone came into the room; naturally I thought it was you. I



was still dazed from shock and only half awake. First thing I knew, a man in uniform had jammed a shock-cushion over my face. I thought he was trying to kill me, and nearly smothered. He rubbed something on my arms and down my neck, then left. I blamed you vaguely till I remembered the gold braid on his sleeves and knew it must have been a ship's officer. Later an officer came in with the doctor, who took one look at me and seemed scared to death. Too scared to examine me. They wouldn't listen to anything, just untied me enough so's I could work loose eventually, left some stuff and locked me in. That's all I knew until you let me out just now. And now what about the photograph? What's he wanted for?"

"There's another one of him in the Security Police Headquarters. He's the man I was sent to get. The original charge was barratry, but——"

"What's barratry?" she asked.

"It's the deliberate wrecking of a ship, for the insurance or to salvage the cargo illegally. 'I don't know what your connection with this man is——'"

"It's very simple," she said. "He's my brother. I knew he was in trouble, but I never dreamt it was so serious. I—I wanted to find Ken and help him. I thought that if I was able to talk to him he'd give himself up, take his punishment, and we could start over again together. Ken's all I have left. He's not bad. A little wild, but not bad."

Krane stood up and stared at the black gulf of space through the visorplate. He felt a sudden bleak distaste for his profession. "I'm afraid it's a little too late for that. He's wanted for barratry, murder and perhaps treason. The penalty for any one of them is death. I'm sorry."

Far out in the void a faint cluster of blurred needle points etched themselves against the star patterned darkness. Space-ships coming up fast under rocket power. Krane glanced quickly at the wallchron. It was too soon for the space-patrol. Even under full acceleration they could not make it in less than three hours.

"I'll have to trust you," he said grimly. "Brace yourself—company's coming."

Noni snapped out of her black reverie. "What are you going to do?"

"We'd better work out a plan of action." Working like mad, Krane dumped the contents of the metal toolbox on the floor. With a spanner he smashed the hand-operated controls which worked the airlock from the interior of the ship, into a tangle of twisted machinery.

"Get inside the toolbox," he ordered. "Try it once to make sure you can raise the lid from the inside, then keep out of sight. When they get here I'll try and draw them away into the after part of the ship. Then you slip out and get into the airlock, closing the door and locking it from the inside. If I manage to circle round, I'll get back here and signal you—three hard knocks followed by three short. That way you'll have a gambler's chance."

"Good luck," said Noni softly. She slid into the toolbox while Krane recharged the blaster and stuffed his pockets with extra ammunition.

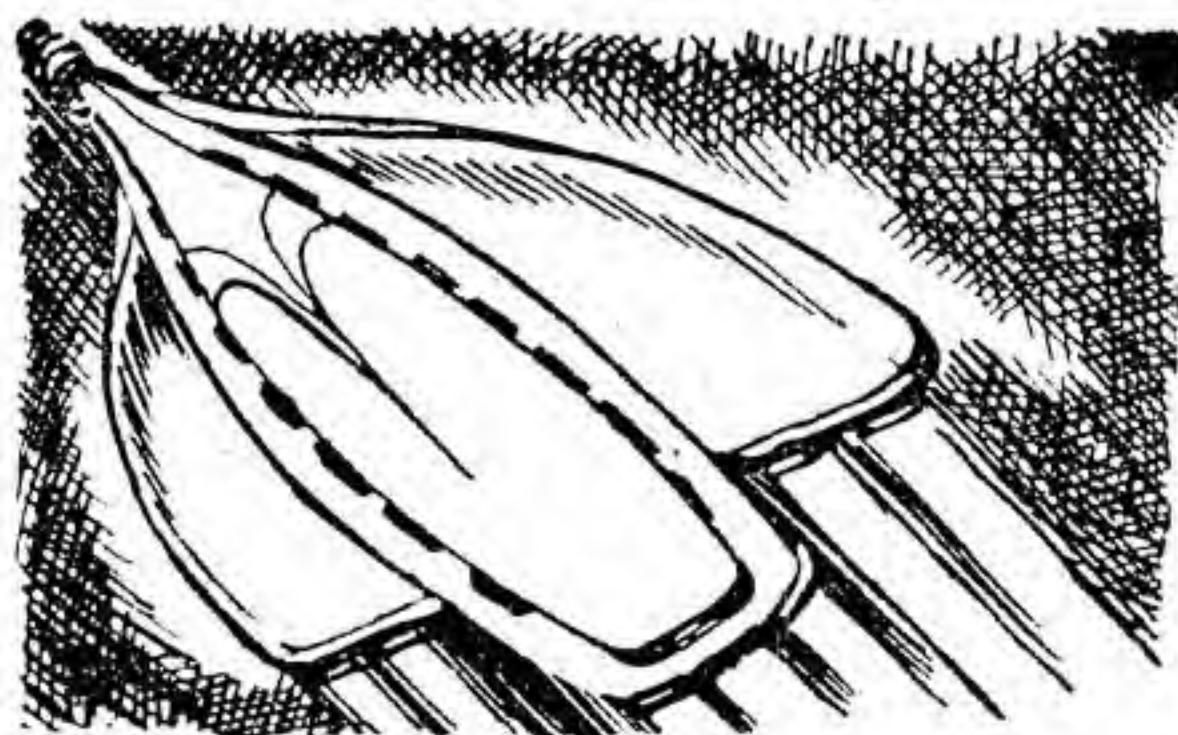
Noni raised the lid of the box slightly. "It works, Clive," she said.

"Take care of yourself."

He grinned. "One thing more. When you're in the airlock, get into a space suit and have one ready for me." She nodded and let the lid down. Krane rearranged the stowage of boxes in the next compartment into a series of defensive barricades, then crouched behind the half-open door of the sally-port. He had not long to wait.

The sally-port door swung fully open and three rough looking men came in. They were followed by a dozen others not wearing the heavily insulated space armour. The pirates must have run a sealed gangway tube between the two ships and fastened it with magnetic grapnels.

Krane took careful aim and fired the blaster into the crowd of men. Four were killed by the first discharge. The others broke for cover. Blaster beams interlaced, and the room jarred with the repeated concussion. Men poured through the open



door. The temperature rose sharply with the release of energy, then the pirates rushed the door and Krane was forced to retreat to his line of barricades.

He did so cautiously, firing as he went. From behind the last of his barricades he managed to burn down three of his foes, then broke and ran for the engine room shaft, leaping across it to the spiral stair. Just as he reached the upper engine loft, a beam cut down the shaft. He dodged behind a massive generator, but three blaster beams concentrated on it. The force of their triple discharge tore it from its moorings. Artificial gravity combined with its mass to send it crashing into a tangle of intricate machinery below.

To avoid being crushed, Krane was forced to plunge down the second shaft, then lost himself in the spider-web of inner support beams. The renegades scattered and climbed after him in the maze of beams,

probing with their blaster rays, as shadows moved uneasily in the eerie darkness. The lumi-bulbs waxed and waned as the unsteady current fluctuated.

Further and further Krane led them, always away from the sally-port and the airlock, darting chance beams at his pursuers whenever the opportunity presented itself. He had the advantage of knowing that they were all enemies. Their forces were divided and confused. In the weird and uncomfortable lofts of the engine room clear targets were impossible.

A wild half-plan occurred to Krane. He headed for the main engine room switch box and, with his beam, burned out all the fuses.

Pit-like darkness enveloped the lofts as the lumi-bulbs went out. It was touch and go sliding down the long beams in utter darkness. He reached a cat-walk and made his way back. Once he collided with a heavy body and the man swore savagely. Krane gave a slight push and the man disappeared over the edge of the catwalk and fell, a pulped mass, on the tangle of machinery below.

By a miracle he found a hatchway which opened into the deserted passageway leading back to the room where he had erected his hasty barricades. It was occupied.

Two men had been left behind as guards. He caught them unawares and burned them down with a single sweep of his blaster beam.

Then, with the butt of his blaster, he tapped out the signal on the airlock door. There was the smooth hiss of releasing metal parts and the airlock door stood open. He slipped through and slammed the door, spinning the lock-bolts tight.

"Thank God you made it," Noni said. Pale and shaken she handed him the heavy space armour. Krane slipped into his helmet and then adjusted their microphones and space communicators.

"I shut the outside door," she complained. "I even bolted it, but it won't stay locked."

"It's automatic," he told her. "When the air-pressure is equal on both sides, it opens. I'll show you."

Just as he reached for the controls, the door opened with a crash. Hamlin stood framed in the doorway, blaster in hand.

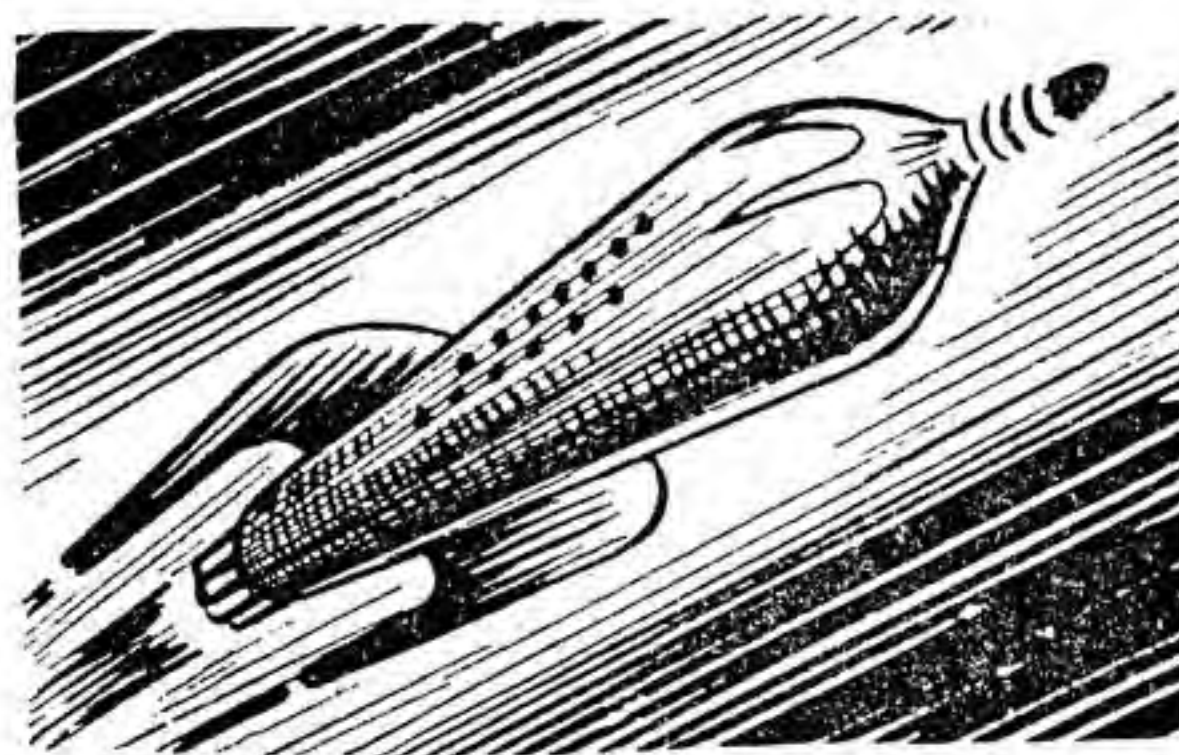
"I hadn't counted on you, Krane," he

said. The gun didn't waver. "Don't reach for that gun."

KRANE relaxed and stared at his opponent. He looked quite different without the plastic face mark . . . somehow older than he looked in his photographs, but noticeably the same man, despite the lines of strain which did not show in either picture.

Hamlin smiled wolfishly. "My pictures don't flatter me, do they? The problem is what you've done with my men. You're becoming a nuisance, Krane. I'll have to kill you, of course, but I'd like to know how you managed this switch?"

Krane was playing for time. "I'll make a deal with you," he said. "I'm curious to know why you pulled that Martian plague stunt with Noni?"



Hamlin laughed. "I recognised her at once, though she'd changed since I last saw her. Ten years is a long time when you're kids, but I'd seen a picture of her since. When I saw you with her, I knew you were up to something. I wanted to keep away from her till I could deal with you. The rest was easy. Just a little grease and aluminium powder. The doctor was scared to hell——"

"You did know me then, Ken?" Noni was staring at her brother through the space helmets.

Hamlin shot her a contemptuous look. "You little fool," he snapped. "You should never have come here. I don't know what I'm going to do with you now."

Noni cringed as if he had struck her. "We'll have plenty of time for old home week later," Hamlin went on. "Now tell me what's happened to my men, Krane? I haven't much time to waste."

Krane told him, and added: "Some of them got weeded out on the way."

"And now it's your turn, Krane," Hamlin said brutally. His finger tightened on the

trigger. Noni stood looking from one to the other, a look of anguish on her face. "Don't do it, Ken," she said, moving in front of Krane.

"Stay out of this, Noni," Hamlin warned. "I'm not kidding. If you get in my way I'll kill both of you."

Krane moved fast then. He struck her helmet so heavily, she fell against the wall. All in the same movement he lunged at Hamlin. The blaster beam raked the ceiling, and in that confined space concussion was unbearable, even inside the space-suits. Krane's blow knocked Hamlin through the door-way and into the connecting tube. Krane swung about and caught up his own gun.

"Don't shoot, Clive," Noni screamed. "Look."



The shock of the first blaster discharge had loosed the magnetic grapnels holding the ships together. The pirate craft began to drift away, tearing loose the end of the tube.

Hamlin was on his feet trying to fire his blaster, but the charge had burned out, and it only flickered feebly. He leaped the widening distance between the ships and went up the side like a spider gripping with the soles of his magnetic space boots. Krane climbed round the doorway and went up after him, gun in hand.

Hamlin had disappeared around the curve of the hull by this time. It was rough, dangerous work climbing around the hull of a space-ship. One slip meant a plunge into the awesome emptiness of the void. Gravity was practically non-existent, and the grip provided by the magnetic soles was slight, and only one foot could be moved at a time.

From the vantage point of his cover behind a dead rocket tube, Hamlin waited.

He knew that his time was short. Off across the black gulf of space, three flakes of gleaming light resolved themselves into fast patrol cruisers, racing toward the derelict. Krane had not seen them but came on steadily, determined to see his assignment through. Hamlin waited, blaster resting on the dead rocket tube, waiting for a clear shot. Mad with hatred he blamed Krane for the failure of his whole life, and was viciously resolved to take his enemy with him.

The patrols had moved in close by this time, and warped alongside the crippled "Astronaut." Men in space-suits poured out of the airlock, and guns were trained on the rocket tube behind which Hamlin was hidden.

Sick fury possessed Hamlin. With the gesture of a trapped rat, he rammed the blaster up the vents of the rocket tube. If he could ignite the remaining fuel, he would blow them all to Kingdom Come in a roaring atomic holocaust.

Krane saw his intent and stood up to fire. His beam went wildly into the darkness as he lost his balance and toppled into space. Another beam whipped out from the space-cruiser and caught Hamlin full force as he stood up to fire into the tube.

He vanished in a glittering cloud of particles, dispersed instantly by their own radiation.

Lines, with magnetic grapnels attached, snaked out from the space-cruiser and snatched Krane, reeling him back like a grotesque fish. For three long days he lay unconscious from space-shock . . .

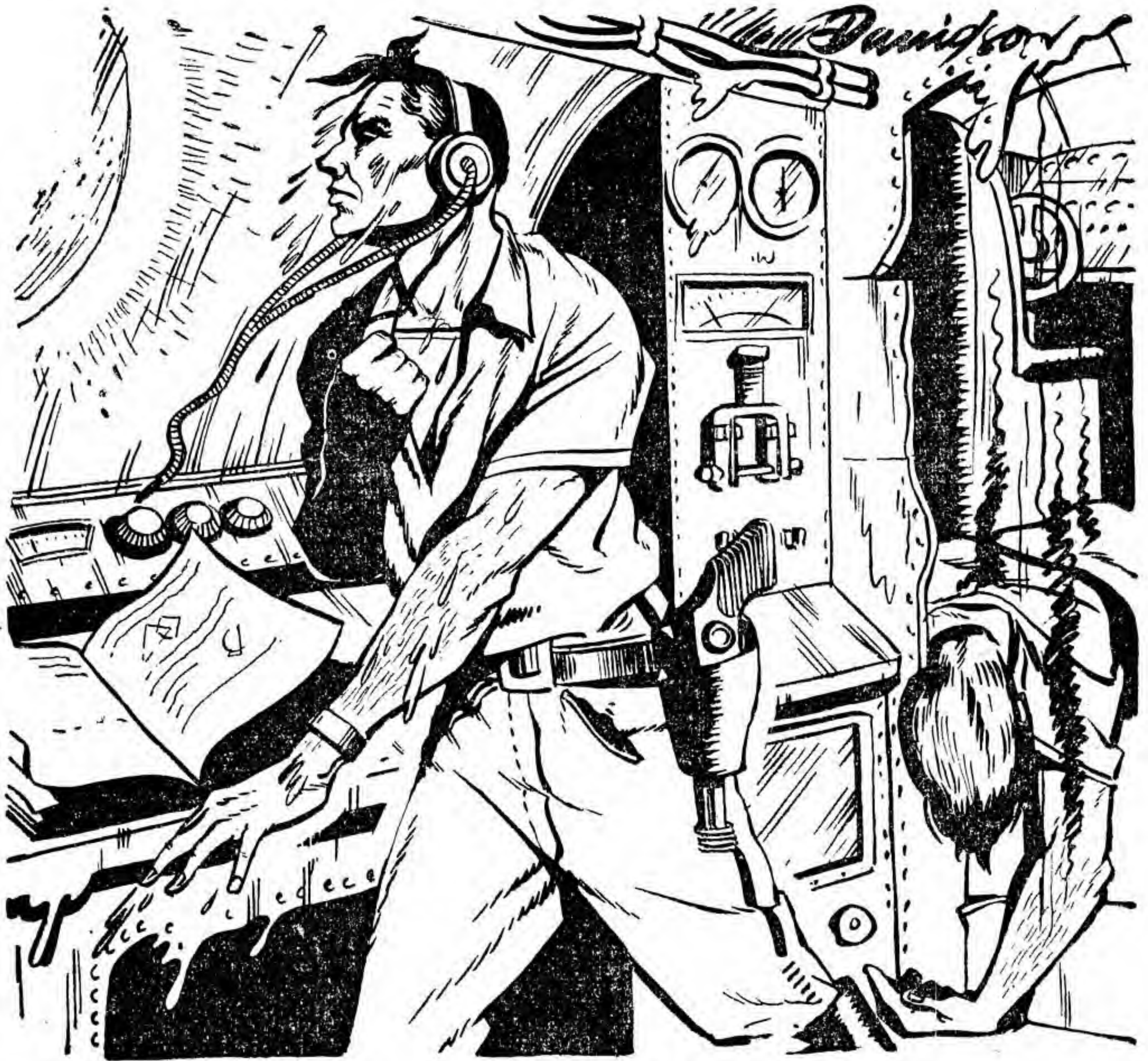
Back on the moon at Lunar Station, three people were waiting for the Martian Express to take off. Clive Krane had just said his good-byes to Noni and Paul. He walked up the gangplank of the big transport and turned to wave to them.

Noni looked at Paul. "Y'know, I really can't let him go. I might have a chance to win him. But how can I if he's on Mars and I'm here?"

"I'm afraid that's out of your hands. Clive doesn't know it, but he's not through with the space patrol. They refused his resignation and he's been made commander of the Mars-Jupiter section. Do you think you have the guts to be a space-man's wife?"

She reached the gangplank just in time to grab it and be dragged up with it.

Space



The captain of the ship crumpled to the deck . . . Quickly Franz went to the control room and set the ship on a steady course . . . he only had a few moments to complete his calculations before the heat overcame him.

EVEN a thousand years of commerce between Earth, Venus and Mars had not been long enough for the spaceways to be safe for the peaceful rocket ships that blasted their atomic way through space in search of trade. That was all the reason necessary to explain the presence of Patrol Ship PLX 421 in sector eight of the spaceway between Earth and Mars.

At the controls in the forward cabin sat Captain Max Gaul, tall, blonde, trim of figure and tough as hard training could make him. In the other heavily cushioned

seat sat his co-pilot, Terry Cleo who ranked as a lieutenant. Terry was a short red-headed fellow with more beef than brawn if one judged by his appearance but that didn't pay where Jerry was concerned and a wise person took note of his red hair and didn't rub him the wrong way.

Back aft in the variable look-out navigation room sat Franz Hertz who also rated as a Lieutenant in the Earthling Patrol Squadrons. Bullet-headed with clipped hair and deep-seeming brown eyes he had the coldly intellectual look that seemed to go with his

Draught

... by ...
RICK HARTE

They were nearing the dawn of civilisation on a quest to find where the world was forged—could they withstand the dreadful power of creation?

ever-ready figures on space-drift, star-sights and new courses. His automatic calculators never seemed to be still with the incessant complicated problems of space navigation he fed into them.

These three rated as tops as a team in the Earthling Squadrons and now they were in sector eight because of the mysterious disappearance of several trade ships in this part of space. Their automatic observers were continually flashing new information on to the screen in front of the pilot but there was never a sign of anything remotely like a space-raider, the haunting pirates of space who plundered cargoes and resold them secretly at enormous profits.

After three weeks, and with nothing better to do now, Franz was busy writing up a detailed log of the ship's activities for the day. He was able to put in a lot more than could come through the automatic recorder which transmitted information automatically back to headquarters as anything was said aboard ship.

This recording device had many disadvantages and the chief among them was that it didn't pay to blaspheme against the top-rank officers of the Squadron while aboard ship for it was recorded in the log and could be read by any officer at leisure.

On the other hand, as a fighting ship, the PLX 421 was so equipped that immediately action was engaged against a space raider full information was being flashed back automatically to headquarters who were thus kept fully alerted to the situation.

"Suspicious sight three degrees off the port stern," snapped Captain Max Gaul quietly. "Get a sight on it, Franz."

"Already have Max!" came the quiet report from the navigator. "Could be an extremely large space ship or a comet gone crazy."

That was the decision of the keen-eyed Hertz and so Gaul checked position and

changed course to bring him up closer to the stranger in the space. Soon they could make out the enormous tail of the thing where it flared out into space in a great flaming tail behind the thing.

"Still no accurate identification." Hertz snapped when they had been travelling on full rocket power for some minutes.

"I'm going in close," snapped the Captain quietly.

"Take it easy Captain," protested Terry excitedly as he viewed the object they were investigating. "We don't want to crash that outfit. If it's a sky raider it's too big for us to handle alone."

Though the red-headed young fellow had an almighty temper at times he also carried a great streak of caution in him and this was one time that he had a hunch they ought to be heading the other way. He said so and the Captain laughed at him. Max wasn't the least bit impressed by hunches—especially when they were Jerry's but he had to admit when he thought about it that Jerry wasn't very often wrong on such occasions. He decided to pull away immediately.

"Take your photographs immediately. I'm pulling out now. We can wave the prints back to headquarters and get an expert identification from there."

His hand swung back on the controls and the ship shuddered desperately and then Terry was crying out anxiously.

"Get out of this. We're being trapped in. Get us out of here."

But doing a heap of yelling didn't help matters much and the ship was drawn more and more rapidly toward the tail of the thing. As they got closer they realised that it was a comet gone crazy off its course and they were being rushed headlong for the perimeter of the flaming tail of it.

"We're caught in a sort of draught," concluded the Captain anxiously. "Almost as if we were flying in an atmosphere and ran

into a heavy-laden atomic blow-hole in the air."

"Space draught! I've never heard of a draught in space before," protested Hertz calmly.

"That's my theory," snapped the Captain with conviction. "It's not a gravitational pull because we're not heading for the area of greatest mass but toward the perimeter of the flaming tail."

"What does it matter?" demanded Terry dismally. "I told you we should have pulled out earlier."

"Naturally!" growled Max sombrely. "Terry is always right after we're in trouble."

But that sort of banter didn't improve their moods any as they were hurtled faster and faster toward the comet's tail. Then, with a sudden splash of colour they were into the centre of the tail and here their ship was locked despite the full power of their atomic tubes.

"Might as well cut power!" drawled Max sombrely. "We're stuck here and we can't get out."

And for a whole day they were careened through space in the Space draught that followed the rocket and though they didn't know it their ship and themselves were being subjected to a bombardment that was to finally send them off on another track which was apt to be a lot less to their liking than their present precarious position.

From the comet's influence they began to emerge slowly and it was with a horrible shock of nightmarish unreality that they observed themselves in relation to other things again. Things looked smaller, were smaller by comparison with themselves. They were increasing in size. Everything was being affected by some strange whim of the comet. A billion-million to one chance was coming off. Some force was working on them.

"We're bigger!" gasped Terry as he stared out at the space beyond their ship. Where it had once been a tremendous void it now seemed to be closing in around them and their ship was huge compared with the moon and they guessed that by now their mass was approaching that of earth.

"I'm gone crazy!" Terry blurted anxiously. "I must be."

"Then we all have." Franz replied quietly, his every sense alert as he tried to

detect some change in himself. He could not. He still looked and felt the same as ever but most assuredly they were growing larger every moment. It was incredible at what a fantastic rate they were growing. It was as if their cells, and all the cells of the whole ship, were growing out and out.

"If we were in a Space Draught before what is this called?" Franz Hertz anxious for a name for this phenomena so that he could make his log records.

"Guess we're still in some sort of a space draught," decided the Captain. "Sooner or later we'll be thrown out of it and we'll be back to normal again."

"That's plain guessing," Terry snapped angrily. "I've got a hunch this isn't a passing phase."

"Don't tell me you think we can keep on enlarging indefinitely?" snapped Hertz incredulously.

"Why not?" demanded Terry eagerly. "If we can enlarge at all in this Space Draught why can't we be stuck in it for good and go on enlarging?"

"Because there's got to be a limit, somewhere," Hertz snapped.

"Don't believe it," Max laughed. "There's no end—no beginning."

But as they gazed out they saw Mars brush past them like a beetle against a huge rock and Franz recorded all the data he could collect. But there wasn't a limit yet. They burst suddenly through what seemed to be a wall in space and found themselves tiny beside the monsters that abounded around them.

"We've broken through the limits of the universe we know," gasped Terry. "It . . . it wasn't anything but an atom in this . . . whatever it is."

"Very interesting," murmured Franz quietly as he observed the surroundings from his observation window. "A new universe. A new space. New worlds."

"Take a hold of yourself, Franz," snapped Max angrily. "All this is some sort of optical illusion created by an effect we experienced in the comet's tail. We should have run into tremendous heat and we met none. That was strange enough! But this! This is impossible."

"I don't think so," retorted Hertz quietly. "Many scientists have felt that even as in the inner structure of the atom is never reducible to its smallest quantity

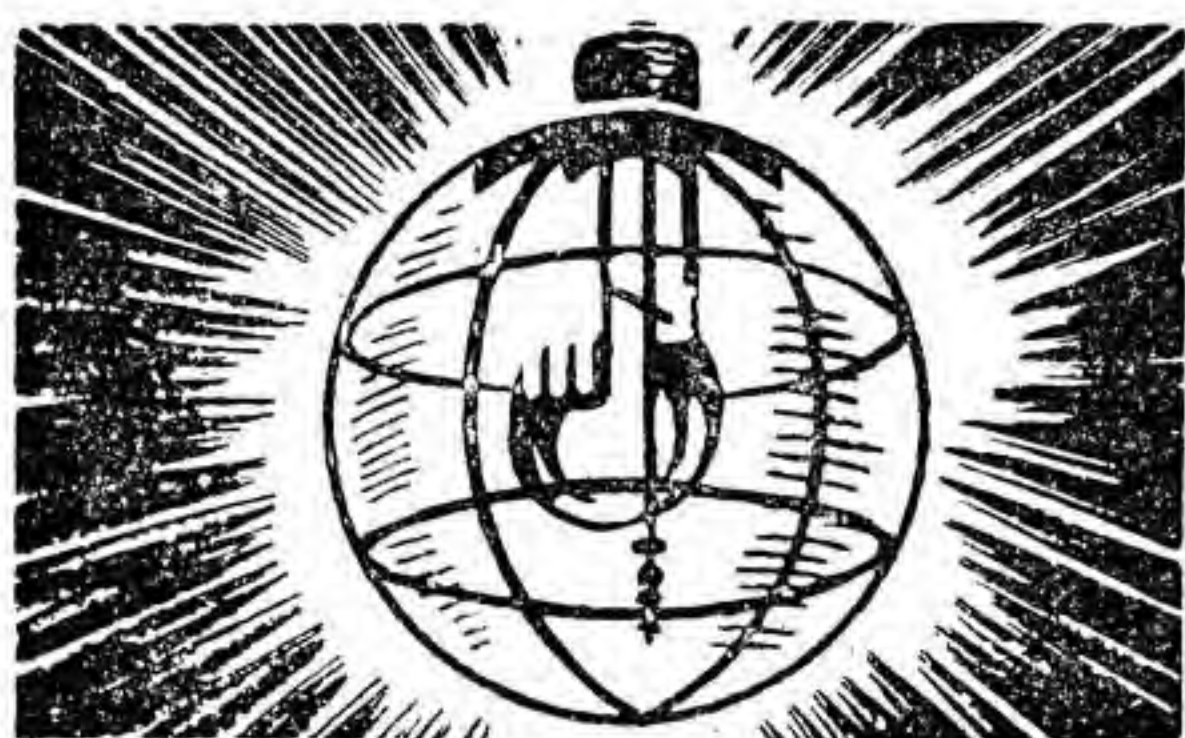
so the universes are never faced with a limit. It is a series of worlds within worlds till the end of time."

"Can't we do something to get out of this," complained Terry excitedly. "Why not use the rocket tubes. It's getting dark outside, darker and darker as we get bigger. Try the rocket tubes, Max."

His voice was shrill and hysterical as he saw the darkness closing in around the ship. His hand suddenly jerked out and slammed down the ignition of the tubes and they burst into life and in a moment they were thrusting through what seemed solid matter and then, suddenly, they were burst into the open.

Below them, from which they had come, lay the dying body of a weirdly primitive winged creature.

"We've just killed that thing," Franz said calmly. "Apparently we were a part of its structure and this enlarging process acted like a cancer and killed it."



"How can you be so calm?" yelled Terry angrily. "We're getting further and further away from the universe we know, from the world, the space we know, moving up and out through bigger and bigger things and all you do is sit back there and make notes."

"What else is there to do?" asked Franz quietly.

The cold logic of this caused the little co-pilot to turn livid with rage, and he started up from his seat and made as if to go back and have it out with the navigator. Max laid a hand on his arm and growled out an order harshly.

"Stay where yuh are. We're big enough now to take a look around."

"Good idea," came the calm agreement from Hertz.

They were on a world of some sort, that much was immediately obvious and above them they could see the pale pink of a sky

and the spaces beyond. Around them were strange growths of primitive form and here and there a huge monster trundled away through the squelching bog of the marshes.

In comparison to the size relations they had known on earth their ship was now as big as a pigeon and they were comparatively smaller. Suddenly, out of the pink of the sky a winged thing swooped down on them and great claws fastened around the ship as it started its rocket tubes blasting.

"The atom guns." Max snapped the order. "We've got to get clear before we're crushed."

Terry, his face red and his hands trembling, set his eyes on his controls and a moment later he squeezed the trigger gently and the winged monster that had captured them jerked upward and released them, whirling higher and higher up through the air away from this strange thing that stung so fiercely.

"We made it!" gasped Max, his face white with strain. "That blast would have knocked a pirate ship out of space and all it did here was to act like the savage sting of an insect."

"Purely a matter of relative size," chimed in Franz in his maddeningly calm voice.

But all the time they were getting bigger and within the space of ten minutes, as measured by the clock in the dial before Max, they were as large as the winged thing that had captured them and when another of the same breed swept in to attack out of the pink sky, Terry laughed hysterically as he pressed his trigger and loosed an atomic bolt that blasted the creature from the sky.

Here time was moving slowly, much more slowly than on earth, and then Max recalled the terrific speeds of the particles of an atom and knew that the larger they became the slower time would move. Ten minutes by the dial clock must be but a fraction of a second on this planet.

Then, sweeping down out of the sky came a flock of winged reptilian monsters and though they wounded several they were captured in the claws of one of them and the reptile swung away toward an eyrie where the ship was dumped unceremoniously. A outer-skin plate was damaged by the reptile and Max snapped anxiously.

"We'll have to repair that plate immediately."

"Of course," came Franz's reply.

"Those monsters would destroy us in seconds," rapped out Terry anxiously. "Why can't we wait till we're bigger?"

"Because we may be losing part of our air supply right now," snapped Max angrily. "Do as yuh're told and obey orders. Since when have I had to ask so many questions?"

"This isn't the Earthling Space Squadron any more," snapped Terry heatedly. "This is beyond duty. I'll do what I like when I feel like it—not before."

Max Gaul stood up slowly and growled out angrily.

"You've been asking for trouble for quite a time now. Here it is!"

And Gaul smashed home a terrific right hand punch that felled Terry to the floor from where he stared up at Max with defiant blue eyes.

"Next time is my turn," he growled fiercely.

"Get your space-suit, Franz," snapped Max. "You and I are going out to fix that damaged plate."

A few minutes later they were through the air-lock and walking over the rough sticks that made up the creature's nest. All the time they were getting bigger but they were midgets yet compared with the winged monsters. Swiftly they worked, keeping an eye out for the monsters' return.

They were not quite finished when they sighted them first and they worked on desperately as the creatures swooped in to land. By this time they were nearly as large as the things themselves and both men snatched up sticks from the nest to defend themselves but the atomic blast from the ship told them that Terry was at his post and the first creature was blasted from the sky.

Then, with the damaged plate in the hull of their ship repaired, Franz Hertz and Max Gaul returned through the air-lock to the interior of their ship. Terry was sitting nervously by the controls of the atomic guns and watching anxiously through the sights.

"I got them," he cried eagerly when he saw the boys had returned.

"I guess you did," Max agreed quietly. "We're big enough now to look around."

At the controls he soon had the ship swirling up into the pink of the atmosphere and as he went higher he glanced anxiously

at the temperature gauge and made an adjustment to the refrigerant dial. It was getting hotter as they grew larger. Terry was mopping his forehead with a handkerchief and glancing doubtfully about the ship. In his cabin aft, Franz Hertz was quietly making observations from his window and then jotting notes in his log.

The planet was alive with primitive forms of reptilian life and a few enormous creatures moved through the bogs in search of food. Then they were circling into the pink of space and Franz was talking through the inter-com. equipment.

"It all fits," he said triumphantly. "The larger we get the more primitive are the forms of life. That ties with the fact that things move more slowly here—time itself is slower. So that creatures of this universe haven't had the same time to develop as have we in ours."

"Don't talk about ours!" shouted Terry angrily. "We'll never get back. There's nothing ahead but this endless growth, getting bigger and bigger. Nothing! Nothing ahead!"

"Pull yourself together Terry!" snapped Max severely.

"I'll do as I please," he snarled back viciously. "I'm sick of you bossing everything. I'll do as I please. It's too hot to do anything anyway," he added desperately as he removed his shirt leaving himself bared to the waist. Max watched him closely but said nothing more.

Then they were expanding out through the pink of this space and the enlarged size of their ship was brushing planets aside from their courses till it seemed the ship filled the whole of the hot space of the universe through which they were moving.

"It's getting hotter all the time," exulted Franz quietly.

"What's in that to be glad about?" yelled Terry fiercely.

"Can't you see!" cried the excited note-taker quickly. "As we get bigger and bigger we burst into and through more and more primitive universes. It's getting hotter too. If we keep going we'll reach the dawn of time itself. The beginnings of everything. We'll solve the riddle that has plagued earth's men since they first began to use words."

There was the exultant delight of the scientific curiosity in the man's voice as he

went through and through his notes. Then, with the refrigerant plant working at full blast, and with the heat well-nigh unbearable, they burst into yet another universe and crashed into the open from a tiny particle of steam to which they clung until they were too large to be supported.

Only then did Max ignite the rocket tubes and keep aloft by the use of their power. Their rations of food were running low now for it was three days since they had been caught in the space draught and that had been close to the end of their patrol. But all around them was the steamy nothingness of cloud and no solid matter seemed evident.

Terry was back in his seat, perspiring freely and his tongue kept licking at his lips nervously as he stared out into the steamy cloud. Suddenly he was up and tearing at Max in an effort to drag him from his seat. Max fought his way up and they locked together in a struggling embrace with Terry cursing hysterically, crying out that he wanted to go back.

Desperately they fought back and forth till Max slammed Terry to the deck of the cabin. On the floor Terry jerked his knife from his belt and came to his feet slowly, murder gleaming in his eyes more surely than Max had ever seen it in friend or foe.

"It's all your fault!" he screamed suddenly. "I warned you to keep clear of that comet."

Then he leapt in with his knife upraised. Max caught the wrist of the hand and wrestled with his co-pilot. Neither man was prepared to give quarter now for Max was well aware that the knife would sink deep between his ribs if he gave the red-headed madman half a chance. From the navigator's cabin Franz Hertz called, asking what was the trouble, but paying no further heed of them when he got no answer. He was busy still, making his notes and smiling delightedly as he worked out more and more of the scheme that lay behind the universes—the worlds within worlds.

"I'm going to kill you, Max," cried Terry furiously. "It's all your fault. All of it."

"Don't be a crazy fool!" yelled Max as he fought Terry off once more. "You're letting the heat get you."

"Heat!" laughed Terry harshly. "What do I care about heat? I'm going nowhere. Heading for nothing. Ask Franz, he'll tell

you. The dawn of everything. Where it all began. Ask Franz."

The last words were rung out in an hysterical burst of sound and then he dived for Max again and this time Max caught a good hold of the knife-wrist and slowly forced the pressure home hard so that the fingers gradually released the knife and Max got his foot over it.

For a while they fought back and forth until Terry was flung off once more. Deftly Max stooped low and swooped up the knife that Terry had armed himself with. Then, with Terry crouching back, the Captain of the ship wiped some of the perspiration away from where it ran from his brows into his eyes.

"Sit down and don't be such a traitor," snarled Max angrily, his temper frayed till his nerves were at snapping point.

All the while they had fought they were being whirled in great sweeping circles through the steamy nothingness and once they darted from the cloud for a moment and saw there was still light.

Max went to turn towards his seat once more when Terry yelled his vicious demented hate and flung himself on the Captain again. This time the knife swept up under them in Max's hand and his powerful arm drove the blade home between the ribs, piercing the co-pilot's heart. Dumbly, Max staggered back from the falling body and went to Franz Hertz and muttered brokenly.

"I've just killed Terry."

"Naturally he was to be the first to go," stated Franz quietly. "I've been expecting it ever since we were heading for this universe. I'll note it in the log." Then he turned toward his book once more.

"What sort of inhuman devil are you?" cried Max desperately.

"Inhuman? Me?" gasped Franz in surprise. "Why I've been exhibiting the most basic trait of all humanity," he cried.

"Isn't it basic to want to know—to be curious? Isn't it human to want to be the first? To do something before anyone else? All these things I've been giving full rein. I haven't had time to worry about the heat, or the end of it all."

"You're coldbloodedly inhuman," growled Max and swung away from the navigator as he worked on his notes, taking observations with his instruments every once in a while.

"The next universe after this will be the purity of space leading to the dawn—the dawn of everything," cried Franz as they got through the cloudy swathes of steamy cloud and were clear of the most terrible of the heat and living in a warm yellow light.

"Who gives a damn," snapped Max angrily.

"Come man. See it my way. Come and look at my diagrams. It's beautiful in its symmetry. From nothing to nothing. An endless eternity of fulfilment," rambled Franz.

"Shut up!" snarled Max angrily, peeling off his shirt as Terry had done some time before. "I'm sick of your theories and your stupid scientific gusto. I'd trade all my knowledge just to be back with the green hills of earth around me again."

"Trade this for a few hills?" cried Hertz dramatically. "Why, man! To be the first to know all! Think! Think of the glory of it. Supreme knowledge. The beginning and the end."

A wild rage swept over the Captain of the ship and he leapt from his seat and swung an angry punch at Hertz. Franz ducked swiftly under the blow and parried with a long left that stabbed into Max's face with the damaging effect of a spanner blow. But it only served to make Max a lot more angry than he'd been and he closed with Hertz and the knife he'd used on Terry slipped into his hand with a stealthy movement.

When he tried to use it, however, he found that Franz was well aware of his intention and was not in a possible position for the stroke. So the Captain, his face slitted with an animal keen savage smile, slugged the navigator hard with a right and followed with a left but found that his second blow crashed his knuckles hard against the inner shell of the craft.

"Maybe that will teach you sense," suggested Hertz laconically.

But it didn't. The heat, the weirdness of their experience, and the terrible strain of being in charge of the ship had gradually worn down Gaul until there was nothing he could run on, nothing he could keep going on but his own emotions and Franz was the only object on which they could be thrown. Hatred came easy and so now Max found he hated his navigator more

fiercely than he had ever before hated the screw or the Earthling Space Squadron. He hated with the blind unreasonable hate of a man so placed that unless he has an enemy he will die. Some men can't stand it when there is nothing they can do about a situation and Max Gaul was such a one.

So he only plunged back to the attack with a more fierce recklessness than before. His knife had made rips and thrusts but Franz was cleverly avoiding them, till suddenly he whipped out a hand and caught the knife-wrist. With his other hand he brought across a short length of metal ruler and slammed it down hard across the knuckles of the hand that held the knife. The blade dropped to the floor from where Franz retrieved it swiftly.

"Now!" he announced, still in his usual calm voice. "We'll see how you like it."

And immediately he was attacking swiftly with the knife and changing it from hand to hand as occasion arose. Within three or four minutes he had plunged it home to the hilt into Max's side. The Captain of the ship crumpled to the deck of the ship and Franz dropped the knife beside him.

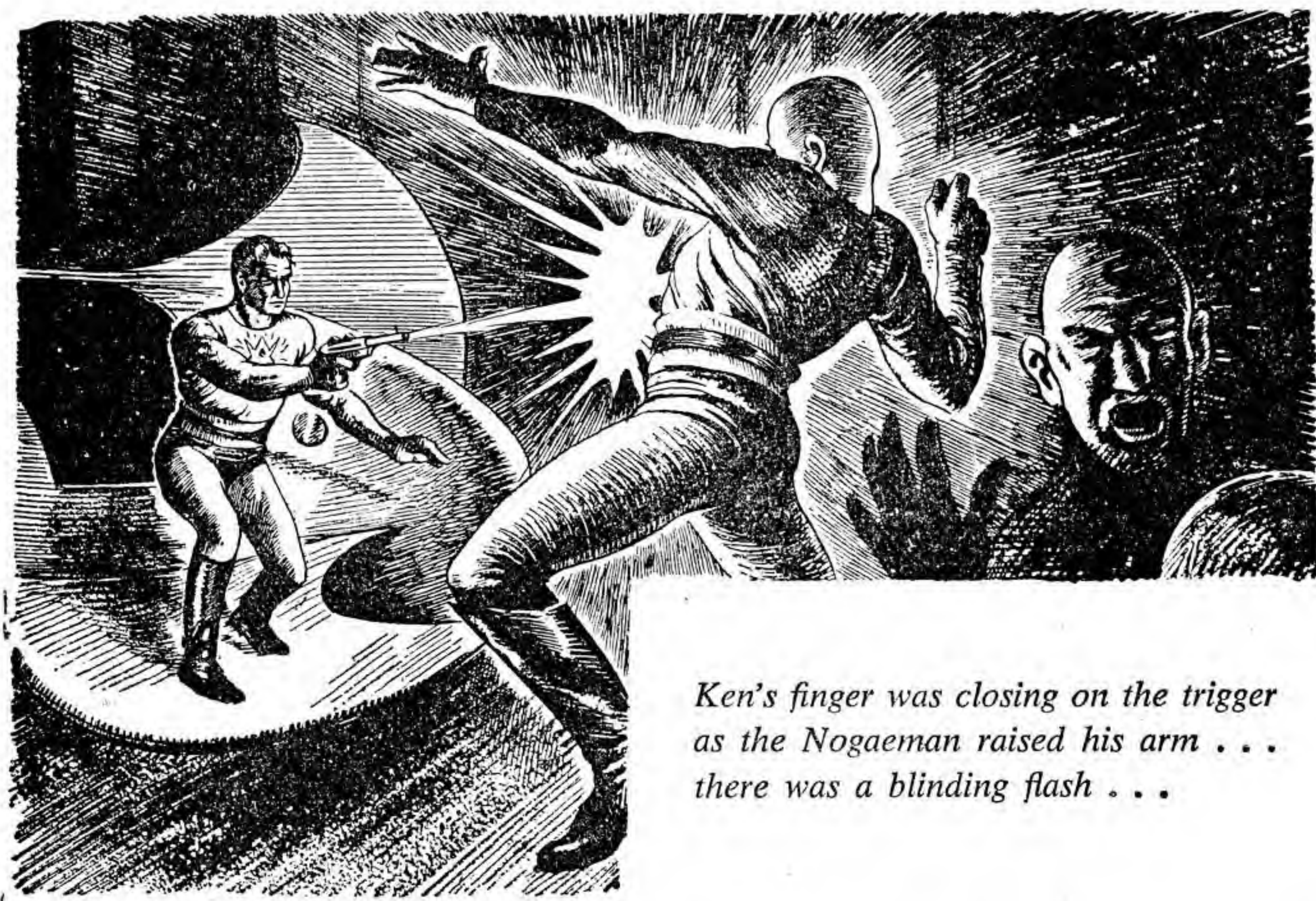
Quickly he went to the control room and set the ship on a steady course and left her then to care for herself while he returned to his observations, his calculations, and his excited dreaming.

Somewhere, he knew, things stopped getting bigger and there it was that the dawn had been, there it was that the first part of energy changed to a particle of matter and that was where the ship was heading. Heading for the dawn.

All around him the metal of the ship was burning hot and the perspiration swelled from Franz in great streams but he would not relinquish his position by the window for as he caught sight of that splendid golden glow he knew that soon he would know all.

Soon, if only the torturing heat would leave him be, if only he couldn't smell the harsh odor of cooking flesh where the hot and buckled deck-plates acted like a griller on the fallen men. But there are a lot of ifs between nothing and nothing and Franz Hertz tumbled from his position by the window and joined his sizzling companions on the floor as he still clutched his book of notes firmly in his hand.

★ *An Ace Carter epic adventure of a space ship dragged into a strange comet world . . . a world ruled by a ruthless race of would-be world invaders . . .*



Ken's finger was closing on the trigger as the Nogaeman raised his arm . . . there was a blinding flash . . .

Devouring Comet

INTELLIGENT INTERFERENCE

THE President of Planet Prospectors Limited gave a slight shrug and looked down the long table at the assembly of directors. "Personally, gentlemen," he said, "I regard the occurrences as merely coincidental, although, of course, very unfortunate. Hazards exist in Space, and will continue to exist until the end of time. We have learnt a great deal during the past century, and thanks to the pioneers who probe farther and farther into the depths of the Universe we have amassed a great deal of knowledge which has helped us to allow for and overcome most dangers of space-travel. Magnetic bombardment has no terrors for us; we can deflect meteorites automatically; and even the influence of ultra-gravitational bodies can be countered." The President paused, and there was a general nodding of heads.

"The fact," he went on, "that we have

lost two cargoes of radioactive material, worth hundreds of thousands of pounds, during the past two months, is a serious matter, and perhaps it is natural for some of us to assume that it is more than a fortuitous occurrence." He coughed slightly and glanced at one of the two youngest shareholders present, Ken Grayfield.

"Do you consider, Mr. President," said Ken, "that there is any connection between the missing cargocraft and the spaceliner that disappeared three months ago?"

"Over the years there has been a steady loss of spacecraft of all sorts," replied the President ambiguously. He tapped the sheaf of notes on the table before him. "The figures here go back ten years and they speak for themselves."

"I agree," said the young man. "There's been no craft lost for more than two years, and in quick succession we lose a spaceliner and two cargocraft."

"I'm with him, Mr. President," said Jimmy Briscoe, Ken's co-pilot and friend. "There is a connection between the disappearance of the three craft."

"You and your friend are suggesting that there has been intelligent interference to the craft?" said the President, raising his brows at the plump Jimmy.

"Well—er—I didn't say that," replied Jimmy self-consciously. "But it's a possibility. What do you think, Ken?"

All eyes were turned towards Ken Grayfield. The young man had earned an enviable reputation as a spaceflyer, and it was his, and Jimmy's efforts, that had lifted Planet Prospectors Limited to its present position of wealth and power, and incidentally given them seats on the Board, and made the two young men enormously wealthy overnight. They had discovered a fabulously rich asteroid composed almost entirely of radio active mineral, and taken possession of it in the name of Planet Prospectors, with the result that the company now had a virtually inexhaustible supply of atomfuel. But although no longer necessary for the two young spacefliers to tramp through Space prospecting for minerals, they could not remain inactive, and they had made several adventurous spacetrrips in their little luxury spacecruiser. It was natural, then, that the young spacefliers' opinions on actual cosmic possibilities should be awaited with interest by the stay-at-home members of the Board.

"I think it is a decided probability," said Ken slowly. "I think that there may have been some interference from a human agency, or by some form of life similar to humanity."

"Pirates, eh?" One of the elder Members threw out the suggestion accompanied by a laugh, a laugh which was taken up by the others.

"Come, Mr. Grayfield," said the President, smiling. "We all admit your skill and experience, but your suggestion is rather—ah—startling. How could a craft be boarded in outer Space without the co-operation of its crew? And even if that co-operation existed would it not be necessary for the—ah—piratical vessel to have identical airlocks with those of the victim? Finally, Mr. Grayfield, you will concede that successful operations of missiles through outer Space is extremely problematical? I mention that in case you are about to suggest that the

vessels were bombarded by hostile craft."

"Lots of things problematical to us could be practicable to a more advanced technology—say, on another planet," said Ken.

"Our regular routes have been mapped, Mr. Grayfield. Every body in Space of any magnitude is on the Astromap."

"I have offered a possible explanation," said Ken, nettled by the President's rather condescending tone. "I now await your alternate explanation."

It was the President's turn to look embarrassed, while the weathercock members smiled at his discomfiture.

"It is easy to theorise, Mr. Grayfield," he snapped. "I have a theory myself, but as it is merely a private theory I hesitated to put it forward here until I had learned more. Since you have asked for it, I shall give it." He eyed the members, who were now leaning forward expectantly. "I am of the opinion that our last cargocraft collided with that mysterious intermittent comet which was reported by the passengers and crew of a spaceliner a few weeks ago."

"A ten billion-to-one chance, Mr. President. But all the argument sitting around at a murmured agreement.

"Very well," said the President. "I have ventured a theory, just as Mr. Grayfield has What do you think, Mr. Grayfield?"

Ken rose. "It's a possibility, Mr. President. But all the argument sitting around at a table won't make any difference unless we decide to do something" He stopped, as a little buzz sounded at the head of the table, and at the same time the visiscreen set in front of the President glowed. The voice from the screen was muted, and for the President's ear alone. He received the message, murmured acknowledgment, and deadened the screen.

"Gentlemen." The President rose to his feet and tapped his gavel. "I have an announcement to make. News has just been received at Control Room that S.C.S. 18 has been lost!"

"The third cargocraft!" said Ken. He looked at the President. "And you still think it's a coincidence?"

"One moment, Mr. Grayfield," rebuked the President. "I have something to add to that. The last spaceradio call from the craft mentioned a fiery comet. I will admit that the sender of the message, the co-pilot, did not attach any significance to the comet, which was a vast distance from his craft at

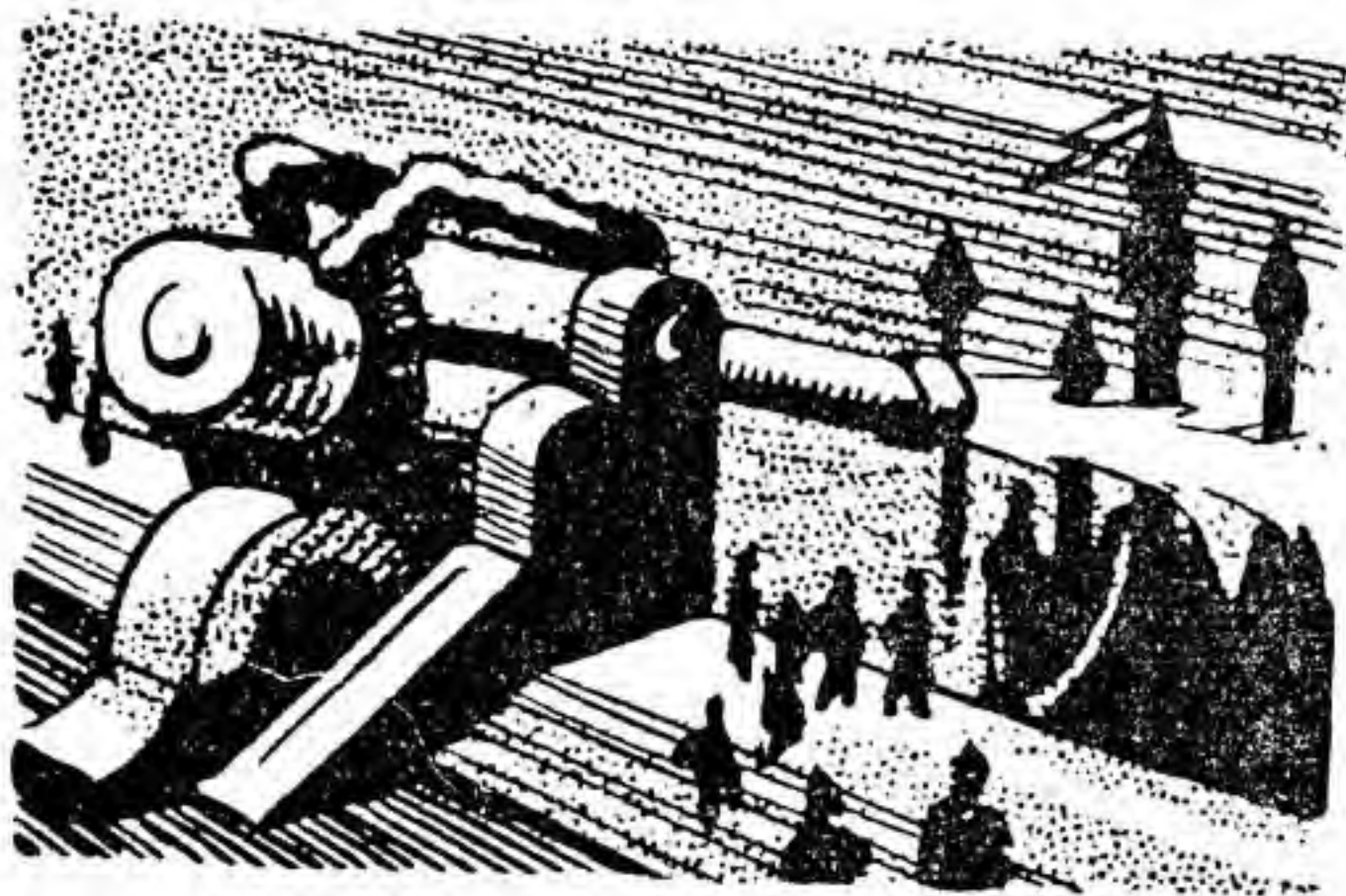
the time. He merely mentioned it whilst giving his own position in accordance with regulations. But I *do* attach significance to it. Whether you gentlemen have changed your minds” He waited, and smiled thinly at the doubting expressions that flitted across the others’ faces.

“There’s one way to learn the truth, Mr. President,” said Ken Grayfield. “Jimmy and I are prepared to investigate. I still hold to my theory of intelligent interference, and therefore I shall require the use of one of our cargacraft as a decoy.”

“That is a matter for the Board.”

One of the Members moved that a cargocraft be placed at the disposal of the two young spacefliers; a move that was carried unanimously.

“I think your theory is wide of the mark, Mr. Grayfield,” said the President. “But, knowing you and your friend here, I’m sure you will remain out in Space until you discover something.” He held out his hand. “I wish you both luck.”



THE COMET APPEARS

KEN GRAYFIELD, at the controls of the spacecraft, looked intently into the visiscreen, and then at the astromap. His co-pilot was staring through the plastic windows out into the blackness of space, the dead absolute blackness not intended for the eyes of an earthdweller.

“This is roughly the vicinity from where the last spaceradio call came from Space-cargo Craft 18,” said Ken, bringing the craft around in a wide sweep. “Not that that means much. It may not have struck trouble for an hour or so later, and an hour to a spacecraft means a lot of miles in Space.”

Jimmy Briscoe nodded glumly. “If we had any idea of its direction we could make that way. But as it is it’s no use getting off the regular track—that if, if your argument

is correct. If there’s some sort of controlled craft, manned by a being from another planet, then it’s sure to be prowling about on the regular run, looking for victims.”

“I still think I’m right,” said Ken, doggedly. “Three ships, one after another, can’t disappear without trace without a logical reason; and I’m sure that each one has been lost through the same agency.”

“And what about the President’s fiery comet theory?”

“I can’t swallow that,” retorted Ken. “There would be about as much chance of that happening as there would be for a tennis ball floating in the Atlantic striking a— a canoe! And if the countless billions-to-one chance did come off, it wouldn’t occur three times. We can dismiss the fiery comet from our calculations, Jimmy.”

Both he and Jimmy turned their attention to the visiscreen in which floated tiny images of planets and asteroids like marbles, the asteroids and planetoids little larger than pinheads, and one planet, Jupiter, showing against the black background like a glowing pearl. And as they looked at the screen a tiny pinpoint of white with a tail of red no larger than a hair’s breadth in thickness appeared on the extreme left-hand corner and slowly crept across the face of the screen.

“A comet,” said Jimmy, his voice animated. “Strange we should scan one just now.”

Ken nodded, and craned closer to the screen. The comet was behaving in a curious fashion. Usually such a body moved across the screen and was seen no more, its speed depending upon its distance from the scanning craft. But this comet, after appearing on the screen, then disappearing, suddenly returned, and its second appearance indicated that it was now much closer to the craft.

“I say!” Jimmy was now frankly excited. “That’s something new to me, Ken. I’ve never seen a comet with an orbit like that before. Look! It’s in the screen all the time now. And it’s coming closer.”

Although still not visible to the naked eye the comet was clearly defined now on the screen, a glittering silver ball with a blood-red fiery tail sweeping out behind it as it swept across the black sky in an erratic elliptical orbit. The two young spacemen watched the extraordinary sight, fascinated. Comets on the Mars-Jupiter run were unusual, although not rare, but never before had they been treated to such a display of

cosmic fireworks. At best their previous views of these hurtling heavenly bodies had been little more than mere glimpses; and Jimmy was hastily scribbling the account in the log book, at the same time watching the screen.

"Jimmy!" It was Ken who was now excited. "It's coming straight towards us!"

The comet had indeed ceased its apparently aimless gyrations, and instead was fixed in the centre of the screen, its tail only faintly visible as a glow in the rear of the shining silver ball which was growing larger and larger every instant. Ken turned the craft to port and the comet swung off the screen, but a moment later it was back again, larger than ever.

"Great scot! It—it almost looks as though the thing was being attracted to us," said Jimmy in alarm.

Ken's answer was to swing away to starboard. Again the comet swept across the screen and disappeared, and again it returned exactly to the centre of the screen—and again it was larger.

"It's coming towards us at terrific speed!" panted Jimmy. "We're definitely attracting the thing, Ken. The old President was right, after all!"

"Looks like it," said Ken between his teeth. "But I still can't understand it. A little ship like this attracting a comet through thousands and thousands of miles of Space. It doesn't make sense."

The fiery comet was almost the full size of the screen, its tail causing a red background for it in place of the normal blackness of the screen. Jimmy wrenching his gaze from the screen peered out through the glastic nose of the craft. He caught his breath sharply as he saw directly ahead the tiny silver ball with its fiery red aura. And then it disappeared as Ken swung the craft around in a wide sweep and headed back the way they had come.

"Keep an eye out to the rear, Jimmy," he rapped out. "We're moving away from here. If that thing collides with us the mystery of those missing craft will never be solved."

Jimmy pulled himself along the interior of the craft, gripping the handrails and floating, weightless as he was out there in Space, to the rear of the machine. He expected, when he looked through the glastic rear window, to see the comet as a dwindling speck; instead, his startled eyes beheld the

comet sweeping after them and gaining every second.

"Step her up, Ken!" he called back. "It's catching up."

"Get into a shock brace," called the pilot, at the same time releasing one of the spider-web-like members from the ceiling. He slipped his arms and legs through the holes in the apparatus, and after satisfying himself that his friend was likewise protected against the tremendous acceleration which was now about to take place, he operated the major converter. The spacecraft leapt forward, the web-like brace straining to its limits, and the pilot feeling as though a heavy weight was pressing against his chest, a pressure that seemed about to flatten his ribs against his spine. The plump Jimmy, on the other hand, was experiencing sensations exactly opposite to those of his friend. He was facing the tail of the craft and the pressure was on his back, and he was suffering intense spine-cracking agony.

Fortunately, the sensation was momentary, and when he opened his eyes again, which he had involuntarily screwed up with pain, he saw that the fiery comet was dwindling.

"We've beaten it, Ken!" he roared jubilantly. "It's dropping away."

"Good!" breathed the other. "I want to circle it if I can. I'm curious to learn something more of that mysterious comet. If I slacken down—"

"Don't slacken!" shouted Jimmy in alarm. "It's catching up again. It—it's coming up as though we're standing still!"

Ken turned a startled face and looked along the length of the little spacecraft. There was no doubt about it. The comet was hurtling towards them at a fantastic speed. The shining silver ball with its blood-red background was almost on top of them. He pressed down the major converter to its limit, but the effect was negligible.

"It's on us!" yelled Jimmy. "We're done!"

CONTROLLED COMET

THE two young spacemen braced themselves for the shock—for the collision that would shatter their craft to fragments, send their bodies out into Space to burst—and provide yet another problem for the puzzled people of Earth. But the shock did not come. Instead, they had a glimpse of the comet shooting past them, a matter of less than half a mile away, its enormous tail

filling the interior of the little craft with a bright red glow.

"Well!" gulped Jimmy, sweat starting from his forehead. "That's as close as I ever want to be to—"

"We're catching up with it," cut in Ken. For some reason the comet had slowed down and was now racing along level with the craft. The pilot gradually decreased the speed and the comet moved ahead, but after a few moments its own speed decreased so that again it was travelling at the same speed as the spacecraft.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" gasped Ken. He stared through the side shield at the hurtling comet. It was a comparatively tiny body, its diameter little more than a mile, while its tail, so far as he could judge, would be about five miles in length; but no doubt that would extend to twice that length when travelling at greater speeds. For the rest, its surface was smooth and silvery, and gave an impression of great metallic density.

"What do you make of it?" demanded Jimmy, returning to his side.

"That tail!" Ken was watching the comet closely, and it was nearer to their craft, the

distance having been lessened to perhaps a quarter of a mile. "It's not just a streak of light; it's an actual flame. No! It's a series of fires See? There! There's a white-hot mass on this side, and a little distance away, a hundred yards or so, is another white-hot mass. There must be dozens—scores—of them all adding up to one big conflagration and giving the effect of a tail as it shoots through Space. The thing must be composed of white-hot material of some kind. Either that or there is constant atomic energy being generated in its interior. But I can't puzzle out how it's apparently being attracted to our craft." He turned his attention to the spaceradio transmitter. "Just in case it suddenly swings over our way I'm going to send a message through to Earth Spaceradio, giving the details of our experience." He turned the switch, waited for the transmitter screen to glow, but it remained blank and dead.

"It's cut out," he said. "That explains why none of the missing craft sent a message immediately before they were lost or destroyed. This comet must possess an enormously powerful magnetic field, a sort of a

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blanket against radio-activity in its vicinity."

"And it all adds up to the President's theory," said Jimmy. "You're satisfied that he was right now?"

"Looks like it . . . I'm going to try to get out of its range and send that message across to Earth. It'll make the President feel satisfied with himself at least."

Ken turned the craft, but almost immediately the mysterious comet turned with them. He twisted, dived and climbed, but the comet, as though attached to the craft by an invisible arm, faithfully kept pace with the craft.

"Gosh!" breathed Jimmy. "It's like an Old Man of the Sea. It won't be shaken off . . . What the—Something's happening to it, Ken. The tail! It's smaller. The fires on this side have died down to nothing . . . It's—Look! Look—will you?" The plump young man's voice had risen to a shriek. "Am I going mad? Can *you* see it?" He grasped Ken Grayfield by the shoulder, and stared open-mouthed through the glastic side-port. Ken, no less shocked, was looking with unbelieving eyes at the comet.

Not only had the tail dwindled by reason of a cessation of the fiery activity on the side nearest them, but low down in the great globe a black line had appeared, about a hundred yards in length and running laterally along the comet. The line was at first thin, but gradually it widened, so that it had all the appearance of a great mouth opening in a dead silvery face.

So intent were the two young spacemen on this extraordinary phenomenon that they failed to notice another and a more ominous development. It was Ken who discovered the fresh danger, and he reacted by turning back to the controls.

"It's coming over to us, Jimmy," he said. "And there's no doubt that it's being controlled from somewhere." He attempted to alter the course of the spacecraft, but the vessel failed to respond. It was as though the craft were no longer the responsive machine it was, but rather a dead thing drifting in Space. "It's dead!" he called. "I can't do a thing with it. The instruments are useless."

The comet was only a matter of yards away. The silver sheen of the thing was dazzling to the eyes of the two men; and then the brightness was blacked out, for

the enormous mouth-like black slit was level with the craft.

"It's an opening into the comet!" shouted Jimmy.

"And we're being drawn into it," replied Ken. And at the same instant the little craft gave a violent lurch in the direction of the comet. Jimmy was flung against the foamrubber of the far wall; Ken sprawled back in his seat. The craft pitched, quivered for a moment, and then was still.

INSIDE THE FIERY COMET

THE two young men picked themselves up and looked about them. The lights in the spacecraft were still burning, but the craft seemed to be resting on solid ground. Ken moved to the glastic nose, peered out, but ahead was a dense blackness; not the accustomed blackness of space, dotted with tiny pinpoints of light, but the darkness of a heavy curtain—a dense, dead pall.

"Well, we're still alive after our collision," muttered Jimmy. "And the ship is intact. But that's about all I can gather."

"It wasn't exactly a collision," said Ken. "We're obviously inside that comet. The black slit in its side was a sort of doorway which was opened to receive us, and our craft was attracted inside by some means. But what's behind it all beats me completely. We might as well be dead and buried inside the comet."

Jimmy shuddered. "There isn't a sound either," he said uneasily. "It's like a confounded grave . . . Do you think we ought to try getting out, Ken?"

Ken looked doubtful for a moment. "I don't feel like opening the air-lock, Jimmy. Goodness knows what sort of an atmosphere exists outside—or rather inside this thing. We'll make a test first, at least. And then, if necessary, we can put on our space-suits and do a bit of exploring. I know now, by the way, that I was right in my theory, and that the President was right too. The fiery comet is the answer to those missing spacecraft, and the fiery comet is controlled by some intelligence."

"You think there are others in this comet?" asked Jimmy. "Or do you think it's remotely controlled from another planet—I mean, it could be automatically actuated by the presence of metallic craft, which it could gobble up, like it has us, and then transport the catch back to some distant planet."

It was a question that was answered immediately, and surprisingly. The blackness outside was dispelled suddenly by brilliant light, and the two startled young men found themselves looking out into a huge chamber. One wall was slightly concave, indicating the outer casing of the comet, and along this wall was a series of vertical furrows, and one long horizontal ridge of gleaming metal. Above the vertical furrows were several huge cylinders, and pistons descended from them to the horizontal ridge.

"That's the door, and its mechanism," said Ken quickly. "And, look, Jimmy, straight ahead. Our missing cargocraft—the last one!"

"Gosh!" Jimmy stared. It was a cargocraft similar to their own, and the lettering "S.C.S.18" was boldly visible on its side. "Where are the others, I wonder?"



"Probably dumped out in Space," replied Ken grimly. "To make room for us, and any other craft that comes within range."

They moved to the other side of their craft and peered out, and saw that a door was sliding up silently in the inner wall, revealing a brilliantly illuminated room. In the doorway a figure appeared. It was a human figure, but its height was more than seven feet. The face of the man was smooth, the skull entirely devoid of hair. There were minute eyelashes on the lids covering the deep set eyes, but no eyebrows. He was dressed in brief shorts and an almost skin-tight shirt, both of a glossy, brilliant red material. The scantiness of his attire revealed the perfect proportions of his great body, and the smoothness of his skin, which had in it a faint yellow tint.

He stepped from the doorway, followed by another being, only slightly less in stature, and similarly clad. Under the wondering eyes of the two Earthmen the tall beings walked around the craft, eyeing it

with apparent approval. Then the taller man walked over, rapped on the glastic panel on the port side and made signs to the Earthmen to open the airlock.

"What do you think, Ken?" asked Jimmy. "Atmosphere must be O.K. They're human, even if they are a bit oversize."

"We've got no choice," replied Ken. "I'm keen to get out and find out what I can about this mystery comet. But I'm not going without an Atoblaster. Open up, while I slip one in my pocket."

Unobtrusively he pocketed the weapon as his plump friend released the air lock; and then the two men stepped from their craft to confront the huge residents of the fiery comet.

TAN ROKA'S PLAN

"GREETINGS, and welcome to our craft," said the taller man in perfect English. And, observing the astonished looks of the two Earthmen, he added, with a smile, "You are not the first guests we have entertained. Over the past few months, as calculated by your Earth-time, we have had many visitors. From them we have learned the language which is now almost universally used on Earth. We have learned also many things about your planet—a most desirable planet, it seems." He glanced at the other man as he spoke, and the two smiled meaningly.

"You've certainly staggered me," said Ken. "To hear you speak our language as though it is your own—"

"You do not surprise me," put in the man. "Already we know that learning to you people of Earth is a long and tedious process. To us, of Nogae, whose culture is thousands of years in advance of your own, learning is a swift and simple matter. You Earth folk require time in order to become habituated to new skills; with us that tedious and time-wasting process is unnecessary. We learn instantaneously."

"That explains it, to some extent," said Ken. "But you speak of Nogae?"

"It is the second planet in what you would call our Solar System," replied the man. "Conditions there correspond to those of the third planet of your system. Atmospheric pressure and gravity is almost identical."

"Gravity!" It was Jimmy who interrupted. "I say, there IS gravity here—out in Space!"

"Artificially created gravity," said the tall man. "It exists only within this craft, and makes this more comfortable for us. That is important, for we must live in our craft all the time."

"And this is a craft!" breathed Ken. "It—it's a colossal achievement. It's more than a mile in diameter."

"You will find many interesting things aboard our craft, while you are with us." The taller man nodded to his companion. "This is Gru Nadar, whom I can best describe to you as my Deputy. I am Tan Roka, commander of the craft."

Ken responded by introducing his friend and himself. "And now, Tan Roka," he said quickly, "I think we are entitled to an explanation. No doubt your method of inducing us to visit your craft was necessary, but others have paid you involuntary visits over the past few months, and they are still your guests. Are they prisoners—or isn't it possible for craft to leave here once they are inside?"

"You must be patient, my little friends," smiled Tan Roka. "You do not understand the lengthy explanation required to answer fully your questions. I must first ask you a question. Your craft is carrying radioactive material, is it not?"

"Not a scrap," replied Ken, closely watching the expression on the giant's face, and noting a sudden change in the deep-set eyes. "We're using a cargocraft, that's all."

He felt the eyes burning into his own, then Tan Roka turned to his companion. "He is speaking the truth."

"Then we have brought them in to no purpose," said Gru Nadar, his voice deep and harsh. "Send them away, as we did the others."

The Commander shook his head and spoke again, this time in a soft and curiously liquid language. Gru Nadar nodded slightly in apparent acquiescence. The two Earthmen eyed their gigantic captors doubtfully. The words of Gru Nadar suggested that "the others" had been sent away by dumping them in Space, and the suggestion was emphasised by the presence of that other cargocraft.

"You will stay with us for a time," said Tan Roka. "We may learn a little from you. It is possible to learn from anyone. You will learn a lot from us. If your intelligence is

of a higher quality than that of the others, you may be permitted to remain with us until we visit your planet."

"You're going to visit the Earth?" said Ken, surprised.

Tan Roka's laugh was echoed by his Deputy. "Yes, my little being, we are going to visit the Earth. And we are going to remain on the Earth."

"But what about your own planet? Why have you left it?"

"Our planet has suffered the fate reserved for those with great knowledge, but with unsuitable rulers," said Tan Roka, his face darkening. "The planet, Nogae, is now a radio-active mass, and will remain so for countless millions of years. The planet, Earth, will suffer the same fate if it is left to work out its own destiny."

"I don't understand you."

"You Earthmen," said Tan Roka, "are on the threshold of atomic annihilation. You are probing the mysteries of matter—its creation and its utter destruction. Soon, you will use it, and the result will be the same as that which occurred on Nogae. It cannot be avoided, unless a superior form of life descends upon Earth and prevents that calamity."

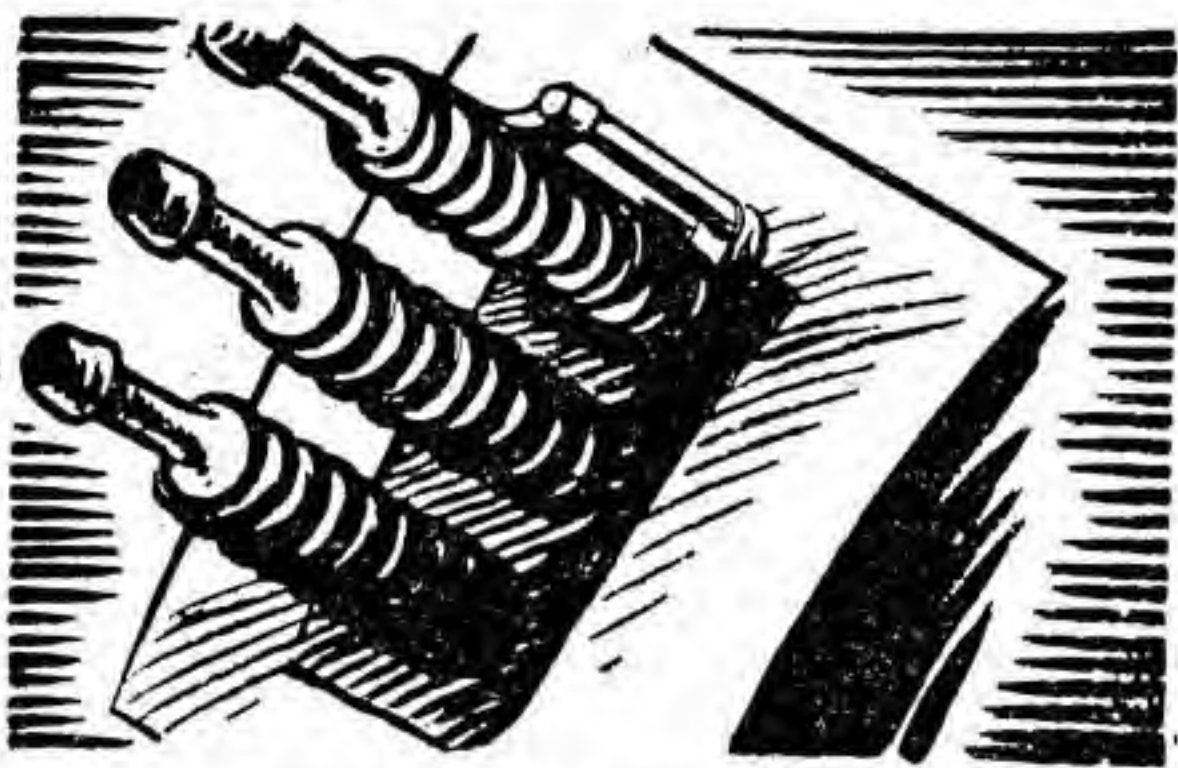
"You mean—Atomic War?"

"I do. We of Nogae, although far ahead of Earth in culture and intelligence could not prevent our own calamity. I ~~foresee~~ it, as did many others. But I acted. I designed and constructed this craft, which is powered by atomic energy, and when hostilities broke out between the two nations on our planet I, and my followers, left. From afar we saw our home planet become a boiling mass of gaseous activity, the result of the use of a process which split the atoms of the atmosphere itself. It was the ultimate and inevitable weapon. The war was over then, and there was nothing left." Tan Roka paused, a brooding look in his dark eyes. "For years, according to your time, we have searched the depths of Space, seeking a planet which might become our home, and the cradle of a civilisation superior to any in the Universe. The story of our wanderings would amaze you: we have entered countless systems, but although many planets will support our form of life, there are factors which make them unsuitable. We at length reached your System, and the first thing we learned about it

was that the inhabitants of the third planet which we now know as Earth had achieved Spaceflying. That is not an achievement peculiar to you Earthmen, but it suggested a fairly highly developed technology. Our next step was to ascertain what sort of beings you were, and if possible to learn something of the social conditions existing on Earth. To do that it was necessary to have some of you as our guests."

"That's what this trap is for then," said Ken, jerking his head towards the enormous door. "Why didn't you simply go to Earth itself?"

"We had reasons which will shortly be clear to you," replied the Nogaeman. "We knew, by our instruments, the nature of the Earth—its atmosphere, gravity, and structure; but there were many little things to learn—your history, the age of your civilisation, and above all your technical achievements. We had also to learn your languages. English is the chief language, we know; but we have learnt Chinese from one of the passengers of a spaceliner—"



"What happened to that spaceliner?" demanded Ken quickly.

"It was of no use to us," replied the other. "We discarded it, after removing its atomfuel for our own purpose."

"And the passengers?"

"They were of no use to us," replied Tan Roka. "We discarded them, after learning all we could from them."

"Why you—you're nothing but a murderer!" exploded Ken. "A cold-blooded killer!"

Neither of the two Nogaemen seemed in the least perturbed at the young Earthman's outburst. Either they kept their emotions well under control, or else they were beyond such elementary feelings. Tan Roka continued as though Ken had not spoken. "You will know soon why we wished to learn the extent of the knowledge of Earthmen. But before leaving this room you

would like to learn how we persuaded your craft to join us. We shall not open the doors on to Space, for the reason that we should lose our atmosphere in this room, and our lives. Once the doors are closed, however, the normal atmosphere is restored within a few minutes automatically.

"Those pillars you see built into the inner wall," he went on, with a wave of his arm, "are ultra-gravitational machines which we call, X-Nogaes. A similar apparatus on Earth you would doubtless call X-Earth, as it provides a gravitational attraction many times more powerful than that of your planet, when actuated from the control room. Your craft was drawn to the machines, just as it would be drawn to your own planet. The intense gravitational field also rendered your spaceradio equipment ineffectual."

"That explains our helplessness in our craft," commented Jimmy feelingly. "But it doesn't explain why you trapped us, and the other craft."

"Primarily," said Tan Roka, coolly, "we trapped your particular kind of craft because we learnt that it was the type which carried atomfuel in large quantities. We had a great initial supply, but our wanderings have consumed a great deal. The secondary reason I have already explained—to learn something of your kind." He paused. "Have you not guessed our ultimate intention?"

Ken's eyes narrowed as he stared up at the giant. And before the other spoke he realised that ultimate intention.

"We," said Tan Roka slowly and distinctly, "are going to take over the Earth!"

A DESPERATE DECISION

"SO you imagine," said Ken, drowning his friends horrified gasp, "that you can take over an entire planet! Have you any idea of the population of Earth, Tan Roka?"

"There were—using your own method of calculation," replied the Nogaeman, "seventeen billions on Nogae. The Earth would, because of the stunted stature of its beings, probably hold more. But there will be far fewer beings on your planet when we take control. It will be necessary to clean out one or more entire countries, just as we have in the past cleared certain pests from great areas of Nogae."

He turned away. "Follow," he invited, "and you shall see more of our craft, and

you shall learn that I speak truly when I say we can, and we will, take over the Earth."

The two Earthmen, led by Tan Roka, and followed by Gru Nadar, walked from the big room, and stood on the threshold of the inner room, and stared around unbelievably. It was not a mere room into which they were looking; it was virtually an enclosed city! But a city with a difference.

Before them stretched a wide promenade, extending more than half-a-mile, and from this central promenade there were smaller paths, some leading to left and right on the same level, but others sloping gently upwards, twisting and turning at different levels, and in turn providing more tributary paths, so that the effect, from the floor level to the mile-high dizzy levels above, was that of enormous petrified ribbons formed into a tangled maze. These higher pathways were supported by absurdly thin and graceful pillars, and the pillars also provided the foundations for tall and beautifully finished buildings composed of a gleaming cream material. Higher and higher Ken looked, and his eyes were bewildered at the sight of the buildings stretching up and up into the distance. Collectively, they made even the modern 22nd century skyscrapers seem dwarfed by comparison.

"Our temporary homes," explained Tan Roka. "We of Noga are individualists. We prefer to live alone, and as far as possible to work alone, for we found at a certain stage of our cultural evolution that our finest work is produced in that way. We work together only against a common enemy, or on a project which is beyond the powers of an individual."

Ken was aware of several of the gigantic Nogaemen emerging from the buildings and looking at the two Earthmen with a mixture of curiosity and condescension, just as a man would gaze on an interesting but unintelligent animal. The inhabitants of this miniature world were dressed in the briefest clothes, for the temperature was delightfully warm, but without the slightest sign of humidity. As the party moved along the wide promenade several groups of the Nogaemen and women were passed, the latter, beautifully proportioned Amazons, only a few inches shorter than the average male, and dressed in clothes similar to those of the men although in more sombre colors; and like the men, there was no vestige of

hair on their smooth, slightly yellow skulls, which gleamed under the soft white light from some concealed source behind translucent panels in the walls.

They had walked a matter of two hundred yards when Tan Roka turned from the main promenade and ascended one of the sloping paths which led towards the rear, or tail-end, of the great globe. He stopped at a high door, and in response to pressure on a small white knob the door slid up silently.

"The control room," he announced.

Eagerly the two spacepilots moved into the room, and eyed the scene. Judged by Earthly standards, it was an enormous room, and the first thing that arrested their gaze was a sort of outsize visiscreen, about fifty yards in diameter, on which was visible myriads of stars, planetoids, and planets.

"Our Solar System!" cried Jimmy. "Look at Earth. Why, it seems no distance away, Ken."

Ken nodded, lost in admiration at the amazing sight. The glowing ball of the sun with a great flaming corona was floating serenely in the black void, and around it were grouped its satellites; the Earth, with its moon having the appearance of a double planet. He turned from the huge screen to the Nogaeman who seemed to be the Control Officer. He was sitting at a semi-circular desk from which protruded a maze of small identical levers. There was nothing to distinguish one lever from another, no inscribed plates; but remembering what Tan Roka had told him of the intellectual powers of the Nogaemen, Ken realised that once the function of one of those levers was explained, the knowledge was grasped and held in the amazing brain of these super-beings. And the chilling thought struck him that creatures with such capacity, as well as the possessors of an advanced culture and technology, might well conquer the entire earth!

"This," said Tan Roka, "is the heart of our craft. The levers regulate the degree of destruction of the radio-active matter which we use as fuel. The speed of our craft is determined by the speed at which the matter is annihilated. The direction is determined by the jets which are in operation. The whole control is sensitive to the slightest manipulation of the controlling levers. There are jets above and below which are rarely

used. Those below may be changed from propulsion and repulsion purposes to another very different and useful purpose."

The taciturn Gru Nadar permitted a sinister smile to flit across his face at these words; a smile that was reflected on the face of the Commander. Ken was conscious of a dreadful fear, not for himself, but for his fellow-creatures on Earth. No doubt that the mention of the mysterious jets had something to do with the method by which these calculating creatures intended to subdue the Earth. But it was the less perceptive Jimmy who asked the obvious question.

"What useful purpose?" he demanded, bluntly.

"You may as well know," said Gru Nadar harshly. "From the lower jets, by means of the simple operation of one of those levers, a supersonic ray will penetrate the atmosphere of Earth and destroy human, and higher forms of animal life."



"Now you understand," said Tan Roka, "why we are confident that we can take over your planet, little man. We can remain out in Space and train our rays on any given area of Earth, and drown your fellow-creatures in soundless vibrations. And nothing can shield them from the effects—nothing!"

"But—but it's inhuman!" protested Ken. "After all, we are human creatures just like yourselves. You can't contemplate such a mass-slaughter!"

"It is necessary," replied Tan Roka. "We desire a planet for our own superior race. We will permit Earth-life to exist on Earth, to a limited degree. Such life, being inferior, will be engaged on inferior tasks for us. They will be fed and clothed—and will work for us."

"Slavery!" said Ken bitterly. "It would be better if you wiped out the entire inhabitants rather than reduce them to beasts of burden."

"Perhaps," agreed Tan Roka. "But we are not considering them." He gestured towards a thick studded door. "There remains now the atomic furnace room," he said. He nodded to the Control Officer who manipulated a switch, and the heavily studded door slid upwards, and a hissing maelstrom of sound poured into the room. The two Earthmen peered into the room, the rear wall of which was slightly concave, great white pipes ran from the enclosed atomic furnaces to this concave wall, and through these pipes poured the released energy from the furnaces.

"It is quite safe," said Tan Roka, stepping inside. "Everything is perfectly shielded. The atomfuel," he went on, indicating rows of cylindrical containers, "is placed in those cylinders, and is fed automatically to the furnaces, a little at a time, of course. The bulk, or reserve supply, of atomfuel is contained in those larger tanks above, and that too is automatically fed to the smaller cylinders as supply runs low. Nothing is handled once the atomfuel is placed in the reserve container."

"Very ingenious," said Ken. His voice quivered slightly as he looked at the great tanks. For Tan Roka's words had suggested something to him, a means by which he might be able to destroy this little floating world, and thus save the Earth from subjugation. He still had his Atoblaster, and if it were possible to blast a hole in one of those tanks, or in a cylinder, there would be an immediate reaction of the radioactive fuel to the disintegrating ray from the Atoblaster; and the chain reaction set up in the masses of unstable atomfuel would result in a cataclysmic explosion which would reduce the fiery comet to a mass of radioactive gas. If he could blast one hole . . .

With apparent carelessness his hand moved to his pocket and gripped the handle of the Atoblaster, his finger on the switch. If he were successful it would mean the end of everything. The bodies of himself and his friend would disintegrate, but it was two lives in the balance of the lives of millions.

And then with one swift movement he withdrew the weapon from his pocket.

SHOCK FOR GRU NADAR

IT was the keen-eyed brooding Gru Nadar who first sensed trouble. He had been watching the changing expression on the young Earthman's face for some moments.

The other Nogaeman, intent on his explanation of the controlling functions of the fiery comet, and obviously unafraid of any action which these pigmy Earthmen could make, was taken completely unawares. He turned swiftly as his Deputy's harsh voice called in the Noga tongue.

Ken levelled the muzzle of the Atoblaster at the great cylinder nearest him, but before he could press the switch Gru Nadar, having uttered his cry of warning, moved with incredible swiftness, stretched out one long arm, and gripped the Earthman's wrist like a crushing vice.

"Let go!" roared Ken, struggling violently, but as futilely as a baby in that huge powerful grip. He felt the strength ebbing from his hand as it was crushed tighter, and then Tan Roka was beside him grasping his other arm.

"Let 'em have it!" It was Jimmy's voice, high pitched with excitement. The plump young man flung himself at Tan Roka, his fists lashing out, the force of the blows causing the huge Nogaeman to stagger; but he recovered, raised one great hand and sent Jimmy staggering across the room with a blow on the chest that almost cracked his ribs.

Gru Nadar's eyes were glittering in sadistic triumph as he increased the pressure on Ken's wrist, and then, a contemptuous smile curling his lips he lifted his left hand and gripped the young Earthman by the throat. The great fingers tightened; Ken felt the pounding of a pulse in his neck as the blood was dammed back under the terrible pressure. In a few seconds he would lapse into unconsciousness, and the last vestige of hope would vanish. He felt the Atoblaster slipping from his numb fingers, and it was that movement which caused him to summon up his ebbing strength—that and the sneering, maddening smile on the big face of his antagonist.

With a last violent effort he wrenched the Atoblaster against the giant's body, and pressed the switch. Gru Nadar's face still wore a contemptuous, triumphant smile, when the man's body, blasted from the middle, exploded in a blinding mass of white heat; and the next second all that was left of the Deputy was a drifting mass of vapor.

Ken felt the crushing grip of Tan Roka fall from his shoulder as the Comet's Commander, with a hoarse cry, sprang back

from the blast; and he heard another cry, this time of exultation, from his friend.

"Good man!" shouted Jimmy. "Now let him have it."

Ken swung the weapon around so that it covered the big Nogaeman. "Don't move towards us, Tan Roka," he warned harshly. "You saw what happened to his body."

The veneer of the Nogaeman's boasted culture and civilisation had slipped from his face, and there now peered through those deep set eyes a glare of homicidal passion. It flashed through Ken's mind that in the last analysis emotions remained constant and fundamental in the make-up of humanity. Tan Roka's attitude had previously been that of one superior to all feeling and emotion, but now he was mentally back in the jungle whence he had emerged countless thousands of years ago.

The thought stimulated the young Earthman. He was after all dealing with a human being; a creature who was nothing more than a would-be Dictator on a grand scale, and whose primary concern just then was his own life and ambitions.

"You are foolish, pigmy Earthman!" snarled Tan Roka, his thin lips pulled back from his big even teeth in an animal grimace of rage. "My Deputy has gone, but you shall go too. I was too careless with you. I should have searched you for weapons, but I thought you were as supine and helpless, and as slow thinking as the other Earthmen we captured and destroyed."

"You're going to conquer the whole Earth," put in Jimmy. "Why, you oversize, swollen-headed so-and-so, you're not going to conquer us . . . What are we going to do with him, Ken? Reduce him to his molecules?"

"Tan Roka," said Ken slowly, "I did not intend to blast Gru Nadar—I intended to puncture one of those cylinders, set up a chain re-action, and blast this craft to nothingness. I still intend to do just that. We shall perish, but the Earth will be saved."

The big Nogaeman looked at him, then a slow smile spread across the large face. "You are just foolish, after all, Earthman," he said in coldly amused tones. He stepped to one side and motioned to the nearest cylinder. "Train your weapon on that, and observe the result!"

"Ready, Jimmy?" said Ken quietly.

The plump young man gulped, his cheeks

pale. "Yes," he said. "It—it's the only way to—to destroy this threat to human life. L-let her go!"

Ken nodded, and pressed the switch.

TERMS REJECTED

ACROSS the control room, straight for its target, the living white flame leapt. A great white sheet spread out from the cylinder as the blast struck its surface; a sheet that widened and blindingly filled the room. But the cylinder remained intact; the only effect produced by the atomic blast being a red-hot patch against its whiteness, which quickly cooled leaving only a faint dark stain on its surface.

Tan Roka's laughter echoed mockingly through the great room. "You did not believe me," he said. "Now you know!"

"I should have known," admitted Ken, "that material capable of keeping atomic force inside would be proof against an outside force." He glanced upwards. "But perhaps the tanks may prove a more vulnerable target. They only store the atomfuel."

"Try them," invited Tan Roka mockingly.

"No; I'll save my blast charges for emergencies, Tan Roka," snapped Ken. "You don't seem to realise that we have the upper hand at the moment, at least so far as you are concerned. One touch on this switch and you follow Gru Nadar. We could use our advantage to bargain with you to save our own lives and demand you release us and our craft. But we are both prepared to lose our lives in ridding the Earth of the threat you and your kind are holding over it. We intend to destroy this infernal craft, Tan Roka."

"That is something beyond your powers," replied the Nogaeman. "You can destroy me, but that is all." He looked at the tense, set-faced young Earthman. "You will serve no purpose in destroying me," he added. "And I am willing to come to terms with you. You are superior to the other Earthmen I have met, and you can assist me in ruling your own kind when we take over your planet. Give me that weapon, and I promise that no harm shall befall you. You may join us in our work, and you will be taught many things, and you will be treated as one of us. I make you both this offer out of respect for your qualities."

"Out of respect for your own skin," said Jimmy. "I wouldn't trust you as far as I could throw you. What do you say, Ken?"

"We are not interested in your offer," said Ken coldly. "But we are interested in learning more about this craft. Tell me this," he said, making a threatening motion with the Atoblaster. "Where is the apparatus which maintains atmospheric pressure within this craft?"

A look of alarm appeared in the deep-set eyes of Tan Roka. It was a fleeting expression of fear, but it was not lost on Ken. Jimmy, immediately aware of his friend's design, started slightly but made no comment.

"Why do you ask that?" said Tan Roka, and immediately answered his own question. "You imagine that you can destroy the pressure equipment, reduce our atmosphere to a vacuum, and thus cause the destruction of every living being within our craft. Our bodies will burst when atmospheric pressure is removed, and the craft itself will disintegrate. And you think I will assist you in such a design!"

Ken frowned in perplexity. Tan Roka's logical summing-up constituted stalemate, and an insurmountable obstacle. The Nogaeman had nothing to gain, not even his own life, by revealing the location of the pressure equipment. And then his brow cleared.

"I shall come to terms with you, Tan Roka," he said. "My intention is to destroy this craft, but only to protect the Earth. If you and your people would go your own way and seek an uninhabited planet, we would go, and interfere with nothing. But even with you out of the way I do not think the threat would be removed. Therefore, I offer you your life. You can come with us to Earth and make your home there. In return you will take us to, and describe the means by which I can carry out the destruction of this craft."

Tan Roka made no reply. He was staring fixedly at the Earthman, his eyes bright and compelling. And Ken became aware of the strange hypnotic power emanating from those deep-set orbs, a power which he had briefly experienced at his first contact with the Nogaeman. He felt his resolution ebbing as Tan Roka took a long step towards him.

"You will give me that weapon," said Tan Roka in a low, compelling voice. "Then we shall discuss terms."

"Ken!" Jimmy stared as his friend extended the hand holding the Atoblaster.

"Don't—"

"It's all right." Ken stepped back, shaking his head violently. "You snapped me out of it, Jimmy. This chap has some sort of hypnotic power. But I won't risk looking at his eyes again for any length of time . . . Well, what's your answer, Tan Roka. Do you come with us?"

"Ken!" Jimmy's voice was raised in alarm. "Get out. Run!"

"What!" Ken swung round, and saw that a door on the far side of the chamber had slid open, and through the opening were coming a line of the huge Nogaemen.

TEMPORARY SANCTUARY

WITH one bound Jimmy reached the door leading to the control room where he turned to see Ken close behind him. Tan Roka made a move also, but he stopped abruptly under the menace of the Atoblaster.

"Keep moving, Jimmy," commanded Ken urgently. "I can't hope to finish off all these. There's a dozen or more. They've been working in that far room, and now—"

"There're others coming this way," cried Jimmy, as a line of Nogaemen appeared at the entrance to the control room. Evidently these men were taking over the work of the others who had completed their time of duty. "We're sandwiched between 'em!"

The Control Officer at his panel had risen too. He took one step towards Ken, and it was the last step he took. Without hesitation the young Earthman discharged his Atoblaster; there was a blinding flare of flame, and the Nogaeman disappeared in a burst of vapor. The other huge beings, who had been converging on the two Earthmen, checked their movement, but a quickly rapped-out order from Tan Roka set them moving again.

"Back!" shouted Ken, at the same time moving towards the outer door. He held the Atoblaster threateningly before him, but he recalled that there were but two charges left in the weapon. Once they were used he and Jimmy would be virtually helpless at the hands of these powerful giants. But the Nogaemen, in spite of their leader's command, were wary, the lesson of the Control Officer too vivid in their receptive minds to goad the Earthman into using the gun. And then one of the Nogaemen, attempting to catch Ken unawares, leapt forward, grab-

bing at the Atoblaster, and the second-last charge spat death and disintegration.

The two Earthmen then leapt from the Control Room and down the sloping path to the main promenade. Behind them, literally devouring the distance with their great legs, poured the Nogaemen. Other Nogaemen, attracted by the unusual sight of fleeing Earthmen were coming quickly along the wide promenade from different directions, some from the higher levels, others from the smaller tracks from buildings on the lower level.

"Straight ahead and up!" yelled Jimmy, racing across the wide promenade to a winding, and at the moment, deserted path leading upwards. The pursuing Nogaemen were close behind, but in spite of their long legs and enormous strength they were no longer gaining on the two sturdy spacepilots. It seemed as though the additional weight of the big-bodied Nogaemen militated against sustained running, particularly uphill. The two Earthmen reached a wide landing from which a great web of tracks radiated, leading to the tall dwellings.

Along some of these tracks were Nogaemen and women moving towards the landing. Jimmy, choosing an unoccupied track shot off at a tangent, reaching a dwelling the door of which was closed. He stopped, panting, until Ken joined him.

"Dead end!" he gasped.

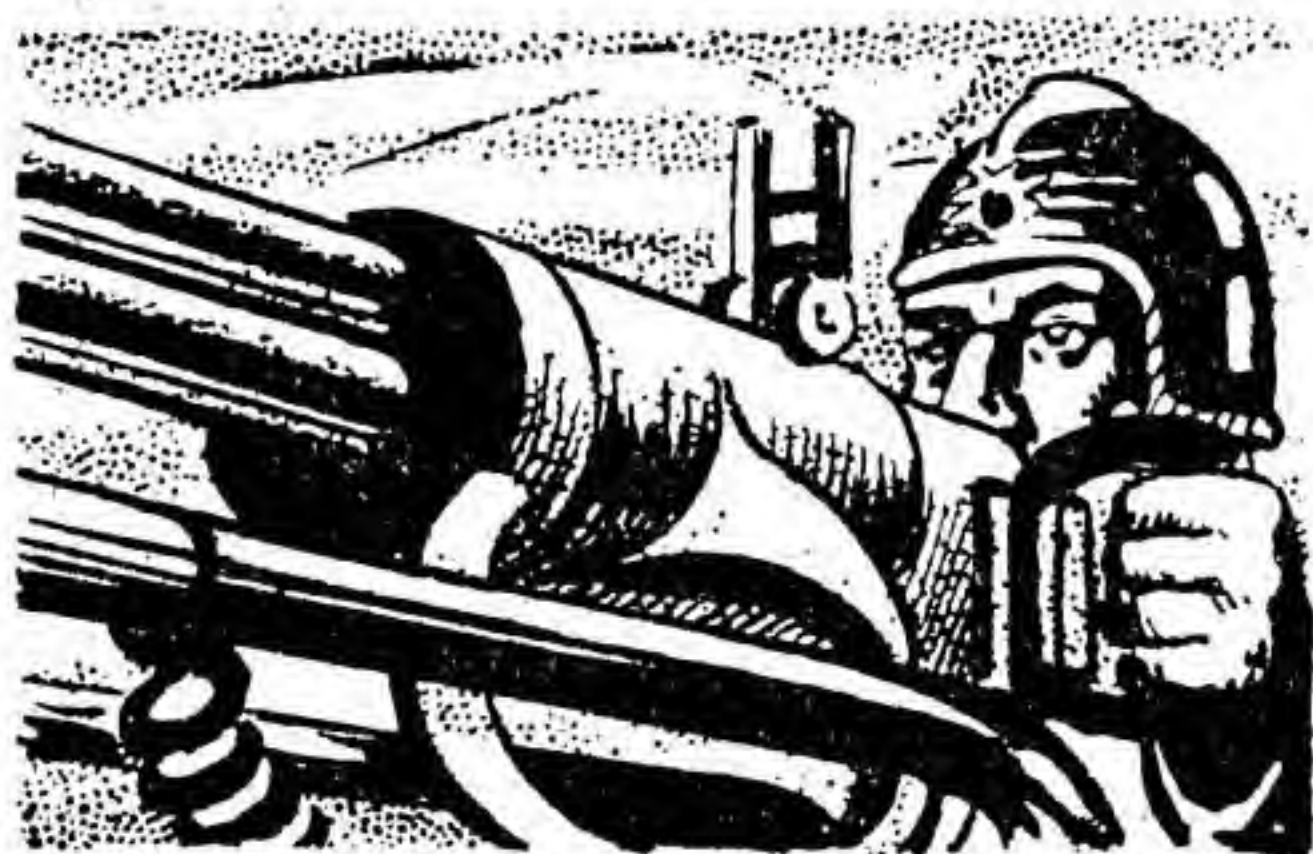
"Can't you get in?" said Ken. "They're coming; we've only got a minute." He ran his hand over the slightly raised ridge around the door frame, found a small projection, and pressed heavily; and even as the first of the pursuers reached the great platform the door of the dwelling slid silently upwards.

He charged into the interior, Jimmy at his heels. The room was lofty, and pervaded by an opalescent glow from a concealed lighting source, the light seeming to emanate from the walls themselves. There were several moulded form-fitting chairs around the walls, and one of these chairs Ken grasped and dragged back to the door, at the same time shouting to Jimmy to investigate further the interior of the dwelling. "I'll keep 'em back while you look around," he yelled.

At the door he saw that the pursuing Nogaemen were pouring along the aerial pathway in a long line. He waited until the foremost was within a few yards of the

door. The huge Nogaeman was already extending his great arms towards him when Ken suddenly lifted the chair and sent it hurtling at the man's face. It struck him full in the chest with all the force behind it that the young Earthman could summon; the Nogaeman, caught in mid-stride, lurched to one side, tried to regain his balance, but failed. He uttered a great bellowing cry of despair as he struck the low slim rail beside the aerial path, and toppled head first to his death below, the heavy thud of his great body reaching the ears of the young Earthman.

The other Nogaemen paused in their rush while Ken, feverishly groping along the inner door-frame, found the control for the door. He pressed it, and held it down, hoping that he would thus prevent the operation of the outer control, a hope that was shortly realised; for he could hear his pur-



suers immediately outside the door which, however, remained closed. And then Jimmy's voice, from the rear of the building, called frantically. "Ken! Quick!"

THE GREEN MARBLE

LEAVING the door control Ken ran across the room and through an archway into another and smaller room where, in alcoves in the wall were long built-in beds. In one corner of this room was a winding ramp, in lieu of a staircase. As he entered, Jimmy came tearing in from the far side.

"They're coming around the back entrance, Ken," panted the plump youth.

"And they're coming in the front way, too, now," said Ken grimly, as the sounds of heavy footsteps reached them. "It's up that ramp for us. And after that . . ." He left the sentence unfinished and ran to the ramp. He urged Jimmy up ahead of him, as the first of the Nogaemen entered the room. The giant, in a few great strides, reached the ramp only yards behind Ken, and the young

spacepilot, not daring to look back, scuttled up the winding incline expecting at any second to feel the powerful hands grasping him.

The incline levelled out to a landing and an open archway. The two men shot through the archway, and found themselves again out in the open, this time on a flat-topped roof. Around them were the suspended aerial pathways and galleries, but there was no exit from the roof itself. Ken ran to the limit of the roof and looked down. The paths leading up to their refuge were literally jammed with hundreds of the fiery comet's inhabitants. A mass of smooth yellow faces were turned up to them, and a murmuring ripple of deep voices rose as the two fugitives were seen.

"We're trapped!" said Ken bitterly. "That fellow was right on our heels, and there were others behind him. We'll just have to make what sort of a fight we can."

"There's an aerial path here," called Jimmy, from the opposite side. "We can leap for it."

Ken looked at the archway, frowning. "What's happened to that chap who was chasing us?" he muttered. "He's given it up." He moved cautiously to the archway and peered out and down the ramp. There was no sign of anyone either on the ramp or in the room below. Miraculously the house was deserted!

"Well, that takes some beating!" said Ken blankly. "They've gone—every one of 'em."

"Time we went too," said Jimmy. "We can make that aerial path, Ken. It's a long leap, and if we miss—well, we won't know much about it, that's all. If we wait here any time they'll start swarming up that path and cut us off."

"I'd like to know what it all means, though," said Ken uneasily. "All right, Jimmy. We'll risk the jump."

But as they moved back towards the edge of the roof a voice from below arrested them.

"Earthmen!" It was Tan Roka's voice. They went again to the front of the house and saw him below, standing a little in front of the silent mass of his fellow beings.

"Earthmen, I have stopped my people from pursuing you. I know that you will fight, and that you will in the process be injured, or perhaps destroyed. I wish to keep you unharmed. I tell you again that men such as you will be most useful to me on

Earth, so I am giving you this last chance. Are you prepared to join us and obey my commands?"

"You are asking us to be a party to the destruction of our kind," shouted Ken. "There can only be one answer to that—and it's No!"

"I shall not bargain with you further, Earthmen," called Tan Roka. "You will be destroyed at once."

"Quick, Jimmy," said Ken. "I don't know what devilish means Tan Roka has to destroy us, but he seems mighty confident. Make the jump, and I'll follow."

Jimmy nodded, sped back out of sight of those below, stepped on to the low parapet, and anxiously watched by his friend, launched himself at the aerial path. His plump body shot across the intervening gap, his fingers clutched the side of the pathway, and a moment later he hauled himself up and was standing shakily on the path. Ken stepped on to the parapet, and as he did so something sailed up from below and fell on to the roof. It was nothing more startling than a pale green marble, glowing a bright green, as though with an internal flame. But as he stared at it for an instant, its shape changed with astounding suddenness. Its roundness became flattened, and then, like lightning, the entire roof was covered with a brilliant green sheet, like a film of green ice.

Ken waited no longer. Tan Roka's confident prediction of their early destruction left no doubt in the Earthman's mind that this extraordinary manifestation was a lethal one. He leapt over the abyss, reached and climbed on to the path beside his friend.

"Look what you missed!" gulped Jimmy, pointing a shaking hand at the roof. From the green sheet a vapor was rising, heavy and green. It boiled up for a few seconds only, then appeared to condense into a huge green blob of liquid, which floated in the air for a moment, then with a little plop! like a bubble bursting, it disappeared.

"A lethal gas of some sort," said Ken, shuddering. "They'll use it again. I wonder they didn't use it before."

"That's why!" said Jimmy. "Look!"

Ken stared. The entire roof had disappeared! The two Earthmen were looking into the room below. But there was no sign of debris. The material from which the roof had been constructed had simply and sil-

ently ceased to exist as matter.

"That's why!" echoed Ken. "That weapon is a two-way one. It causes matter to disintegrate, to lose its identity and revert back to a gaseous form, from which all matter originally was formed. If they use it indiscriminately against us they're using it against their precious comet creation. And no doubt they—or Tan Roka, anyway—considers that two puny beings like us are not worth all that damage. That's why he made us that final offer—he didn't want to use that green marble. He'll get a nasty shock when he discovers that his trump card has failed . . . Jimmy!" He looked over the edge of the path, then upwards. "They don't know we've escaped! I can't see a soul, either below or above. It looks as though everyone not actually engaged in some work or other is on the paths leading to the front of that house, and the walls are screening us from them. If we can only lie low somewhere we've got a chance of doing some sort of sabotage!"

PLAYING WITH FIRE

KEEPING to the rear of the damaged house the two Earthmen moved cautiously up the path, their objective being another gallery a little distance ahead and above on which were several small structures. Around them wound and stretched the aerial paths, their multiplicity confusing to the sight; but the tortuous design of those elevated roadways, and the crowds of buildings perched in apparently precarious and unexpected places, was a blessing to the fugitives, as it was a comparatively simple matter for them to find cover from any searching eyes below.

They reached the first gallery, and were enabled to peer from one of the small buildings it held on to the dense crowd of Nogae-men below. And as they looked, the crowd began to break up and move away, most of them going back to the low level, but many moving upwards.

"We've got to try to get to the outer wall of this globe, Jimmy," said Ken quickly. "I'm satisfied that the atmosphere-producing apparatus will be dispersed all around the globe in order to keep up a uniform pressure. Our best chance is to keep climbing until we reach the top, and if we make it we can search for an opening which should lead to the compartments between the inner

and outer walls. But we'll have to keep under cover. Once they know we're still alive we'll have no chance to do anything except try to escape them, and their little green marbles. Some are coming up this way, now, so—"

"Yes," interrupted Jimmy, ducking back to the cover of the structure, "and one of 'em is Tan Roka himself!"

"It would be," said Ken. "He's likely to have some of those confounded green marbles with him. He'll make no mistake this time, unless I use the last charge in the Atoblaster on him, and once that's gone we're helpless."

They entered the structure, which appeared to be a sort of office, containing as it did a large desk and several of the moulded chairs. Ken stood near the doorway. He could hear the heavy footsteps of Tan Roka, and, his hand on the Atoblaster, he waited tensely. The footsteps came closer; so close that it seemed that Tan Roka was coming to the office building.

"I think he's making for here," whispered Ken. "And there's no back door to this place."

"Then it's a showdown," said Jimmy. "You'll have to use that last charge."

"Behind that chair," said Ken quickly. "I'll take this one."

The two Earthmen had barely time to conceal themselves behind two of the big moulded chairs before Tan Roka entered the office. Cautiously peering from behind his chair Ken saw the big Nogaeman move over to the desk, slide open a drawer and drop something in to it. Then there came a faint click, and Tan Roka, lowering himself into the chair at the desk, was speaking, apparently into some communication instrument. The words were in the Nogae tongue, and meaningless to the Earthmen. He spoke at great length, and one word, for which there was obviously no equivalent in the Nogae tongue, "Earthmen," told the listeners that he was broadcasting through the craft the recent happenings. His speech concluded, Tan Roka rose and quitted the room, and the two Earthmen emerged. Ken went straight to the desk and opened the drawer. Inside were several round brown objects like walnuts.

"I thought they would be those little green marbles," he said in disappointed tones. "I noticed that the first thing Tan Roka did when he entered was to drop

something in here. It looked as though he was returning his unused— Wait, though!" He twisted the brown nut, and found that it was in two threaded sections. A few more turns and it came apart, revealing a dull grey glassy marble. The two men stared at the thing, and then the greyness gave way to a dull green, which became brighter as they looked at it.

"Gosh!" Involuntarily Ken uttered a yell as the significance of that increasing glow struck him. "The thing's livening up. When it's released from its shell it becomes active!" With shaking fingers he tried to restore the upper portion of the shell, but already the green marble, now glowing with a blinding brilliance, was changing shape. He raced to the door and flung the thing out.

SABOTAGE ATTEMPT

FROM their retreat the two friends watched the descent of the glowing marble. It dropped down, down, missing the paths by inches, a tiny devastating meteor, until it struck the lowermost path, far below. And then it seemed that a great lake of green spread over the surface, followed by the now-familiar boiling up of the green vapour. Fascinated, they watched the atomic drama below, saw the cloud condense into a bright bubble; saw the bubble burst, and then a great black patch. And above this patch was a cleared space where only a few seconds before had been part of the tracery of aerial paths.

"Whew!" Ken mopped his streaming forehead. "It's certainly violent, and so absolutely silent. It's pierced the inner skin of the craft, judging by that black crater. I wonder if that force would be effective against those atomfuel cylinders! Gosh, if I could get near them I'd try it, anyway. We've got no hope of getting away alive—that is if we intend to wreck this floating menace, so we'll take a supply of these pills and use 'em indiscriminately."

"We've given these fellows something to think about now," commented Jimmy, looking down at the great crowd which had assembled around the damaged portion. "Tan Roka will have a pretty strong suspicion that we weren't disintegrated."

He eyed the maze of paths consideringly, and finally indicated one which ran horizontally from the office.

"There's our path, Jimmy," he said decisively. "It's the one track that doesn't

appear to lead upwards, and that means it must eventually lead to the side of the globe. It's quite likely that it does lead to some vital function, because it's coming direct from this broadcasting room and office used by Tan Roka himself. All we have to do is get clear without being seen. . . . Grab some of those green marbles, too, and we'll move."

Jimmy obeyed, and the two Earthmen moved from the office, stepping from the gallery on to the horizontal path. They moved slowly, stopping now and again at spots which gave them cover from any watching eyes below, but there was no indication of an alarm from the Nogaemen, still no doubt puzzling over the disaster that had befallen them. The path continued in a dead straight line, and the further they went the more convinced was Ken that his theory was correct; that it would eventually lead them to the limits of the globe.

"This is it," cried Jimmy at last, as directly ahead the path ended at a studded door, similar to that of the control room. He ran forward, searching for a means of opening the door, but there was no evidence of a controlling medium. "Probably controlled from inside," he muttered.

"That means there is always someone working in there," said Ken. "Well, we've got to take the risk. I'm going to try out one of these green marbles. It's either that or the Atoblaster, and I want to keep that last charge for a last emergency." As he spoke he removed the cap from one of the marbles, and placed the marble against the studded door; then stepping back some yards the two men waited results. As they watched the glowing green marble a sudden swelling roar from below reached their ears.

"We're spotted!" groaned Jimmy. "They're starting to climb after us."

The words had scarcely left his lips than a blinding green sheet spread across the metal in front of them. They staggered back as the lethal vapour spread outwards and boiled towards them; and when the bubble formed and burst they saw a great gap in the wall ahead. There was also a gap in the path where the material had disintegrated, but they cleared this without difficulty, and found themselves in a great cavern of a room with its far wall concave, indicating the outer shell of the fiery comet.

There were great cylinders ranged in orderly rows on the level where they stood,

and on lower levels were similar rows of cylinders as far as the two men could see. Pistons protruded from these cylinders and entered a huge tube which ran around the outer wall, the pistons pumping rhythmically.

"This is the apparatus for maintaining atmospheric pressure, I'm sure of that now," said Ken. "But it's only a small part of it. If we wreck this section, some other portion of it will probably maintain pressure automatically. A huge system like this couldn't possibly be destroyed unless we could get to the very heart of it. Still" He took two of the green marbles from his pocket, removed their caps, and placed them beside two of the cylinders. "We may as well do as much damage as we can while we can," he added grimly. "And now we'll see if we can't trace this system to its primary source."

He led the way down to the next level. They reached it at the same moment that two Nogaemen, clad in tight-fitting stained overalls emerged from a chamber on that level.

A WAY OUT?

It was Jimmy who accounted for these two giants, and at the same time causing the disintegration of part of the gallery; and in the meantime the green marbles above set up a billowing cloud of green vapour, but the effect produced on the atmosphere mechanism remained unknown to the two Earthmen.

They raced down the tracks towards the lowest level without seeing anything that looked like a focal point for the great tube and its feeding cylinders. And when they reached the flat expanse of floor level, they stopped, baffled.

"We've done some damage," panted Ken. "But in spite of the power of these marbles the effect is too localised. It's like trying to kill an elephant by sticking pins into its hide."

From above there came sounds of pursuit, as the Nogaemen, who had climbed the tracks after them were now hot on their trail.

"How many of these marbles are left?" asked Ken. "I have four."

"Five," said Jimmy.

"Right! Perhaps we can kill our elephant if the pin is big enough. We'll make a pile of 'em, and see if the effect is strong enough to cripple the apparatus. It won't need to

be out of commission long to make these Nogaemen swell and burst."

The advance guard of their pursuers had reached the second lowest level, and the two Earthmen raced away, at the same time taking the green marbles from their pockets and loosening the caps for their last attempt. They came to a halt at another studded door, but the controlling switch was clearly visible. They operated it, stepped into another vast cavern, and saw before them their spaceship!

Jimmy gasped, but Ken merely nodded. "I thought we weren't far from it," he said. "We knew it was against the outer wall, and that it was on the lowest level and on this side of the globe. But it might as well be millions of miles away for all the good it's going to do us."

He looked around the cavern, and his gaze fell on the huge pillars which Tan Roka had told them controlled the gravity and ultra-gravity force. He gripped Jimmy's arm. "There's a chance," he said quickly, "if we have time. Into the craft. See if the atom-fuel is still there."

Without questioning his friend's object Jimmy opened the airlock and dived into the little craft. "It's still here," he yelled.

"Grab a cylinder of spare fuel then," called Ken, his eyes on the approaching Nogaemen, who were now on the lowest level. He took the cylinder of atomfuel which the sweating Jimmy handed out. "We're going to use this fuel to set up a chain reaction inside those pillars. Remember what Tan Roka told us — that those pillars control the ultra-gravity system and are connected to the control room. They'll certainly control the gravity system, too, and that's part of the atmospheric pressure system as well. It must be all linked together in the control room. If we can break the outer casing with a chain reaction it will react throughout the entire globe."

"But—"

"Don't talk," shouted Ken wildly. "Put it over beside the pillar." With shaking hands he took one of the green marbles from his pocket and placed it at the great door through which their craft had first been drawn. "This calls for timing," he said, trying to keep his voice steady. "This marble should act first, leaving us a gap to get out into space. Then the others grouped around the atomfuel should act, setting up a chain-reaction." He sped across to the

pillar and both he and Jimmy removed the caps from the marbles and ran back to the craft. Jimmy tumbled in, and Ken was about to follow suit when he was arrested by the voice of Tan Roka at the head of the Nogaemen.

COLLAPSE!

THE young spacepilot's first impulse was to dive into the craft after his friend, but Tan Roka held in his huge hand one of the green marbles, and Ken knew that if it struck the little craft disaster would follow. Already the marble in the Nogaeman's hand was glowing brightly.

"Goodbye, Earthman," called Tan Roka, raising his arm.

"Goodbye!" yelled Ken, at the same time firing the last charge from his Atoblaster. And the Commander of the fiery comet dissolved in atomic death with his arm still upraised.

A green flare to his right warned Ken that the marble at the door was taking effect, and that in a matter of split seconds the atomful pile would have its terrific energy released. He flung himself headfirst into the airlock, and fell in a heap at Jimmy's feet. "It's done it!" His friend's voice raised almost to a scream was in his ears. He felt a lurching sensation, and he was tossed against the foamrubber walls. Then he clambered to his feet and looked through the glastic screen and saw with a feeling of unutterable thankfulness that the craft was out in Space once more.

"There wasn't much in it," gulped Jimmy, his face deathly white with the reaction. "The hole was large enough to let half-a-dozen craft through, but I had to take it at an angle. I think I scraped the sides. My heart was in my mouth for a minute."

"The fiery comet," cried Ken. "Look at it—look!"

Against the black Space sky the comet with its great flaring tail was slowly changing shape. No longer was it a globe. It was crumbling into an oval, which in turn slowly assumed a wrinkled jagged sausage-shape. The fiery tail became dull, and the whole crushed mass suddenly burst into a blinding green mass of light . . . and a moment later there was nothing but the blackness of Space. . . .

"The Fiery Comet," said Ken, taking his eyes from the glastic screen. "It lived up to the name we gave it. Right to the end!"

REGULATIONS



By Al Ryan

He fired and flame enveloped the nearest house. Then came a second blast of ravening destruction—a third—a fourth!

IT was only the dew-god making a monstrous noise off in the darkness, but Fahnes allowed his eyes to open and he halfway sat up. There was a shaded light over by Boles' bunk, and Boles was fussily arranging his kit for a journey to the trading-centre in the Lamphian hills. Food, canteens, and the trading-stuff, these things would be left at the untended mart in exchange for a new lot of Ilossa fiber, which on Earth was equal in exchange pound for pound with platinum.

Fahnes made an apologetic noise as Boles whirled at his movement. Boles snorted indignantly.

"It's just one of them gods," he said scornfully. "They make a racket like that before dawn every mornin'."

Fahnes made himself grin sheepishly, as if half-awake. He knew about the dew-god. He had more brains than Boles, and he knew more than Boles about all the things that really mattered on Oryx, though he'd only been on the small planet five months. Because of his knowledge, he'd been awake for hours, feverishly debating with himself whether as a matter of commonsense he had

not better murder Boles this morning. There were reasons for killing him, but it would be satisfying to let Boles come back from the Lamphian hills to find the trading-post in ashes, the Honkie village a mere black scar on the green surface of Oryx, and the supply ship come and gone.

"I know," said Fahnes. He yawned, now. "But the racket does seem louder than usual, this morning. I wonder—"

"Regulations say native customs an' religions ain't to be messed with," said Boles inflexibly. "You ain't paid to wonder. Quit it."

THE unholy racket which was the dew-god off beyond the jungle seemed to grow louder yet. No man, it was said in the Instructions for Oryx, had ever yet seen a dew-god. But the native deities were of

extreme importance to the Honkies, and the maintenance of trade-relations required that their religion should be undisturbed.

Boles zipped his suit shut. He began to struggle into the various straps which would hold the articles of his equipment about him. Fahnes watched with concealed amusement. The Honkie religion was not to be meddled with?

The windows of the trading-post rattled from a sudden special uproar from the god. He, Fahnes, knew things about the Honkie religion that Boles didn't, that the survey-party, apparently, hadn't found out. Gods which roared in the darkness could arouse the curiosity even of a man like Fahnes, who despised such stupidities as gods and regulations. Fahnes had taken satisfaction in breaking the regulations about Honkies under Boles' very nose. He'd set up a camera and flashbulb and trigger-string off where the dew-god roared even now and he, Fahnes, had a photograph of a dew-god.

The blinding flash of the flash-bulb had startled it. It had crashed into a jungle-tree in its flight. And at the scene of the accident—the crystal was in the pocket of Fahnes' sleeping-suit—he'd found a memento of Honkie religion. It had been torn from the headdress of the dew-god. The photograph of the dew-god told how many more such mementos the dew-god wore in his headdress. So Fahnes had planned murder for this morning, and was still in two minds about its necessity. The prospects before him were enough to make a man giddy.

But he wasn't giddy. His plan was carefully worked out. It was so brilliant that he'd honestly regretted that nobody would ever know how magnificent it had been. But there'd been two breaks—one a space-radio message and the other this decision of Boles' to make the trip. Fahnes could leave Boles alive to realise his situation, if he chose. When Boles came back, six days from now, he'd understand. Not completely, perhaps, but a memento—a small one, left on a stick where he'd be sure to see it—would enable him to piece out the story bit by bit as he tried hopelessly to live until another ship came to rebuild human trade on Oryx.

Boles was festooned with all the impedimenta that regulations said should be carried on any journey on Oryx. It was still dead-dark outside. The dew-god still roared, though more faintly now.

"All right," said Boles curtly. "I'm off. Mind you stick to regulations while I'm gone!"

FAHNES slung the flame-rifle over his shoulder, made sure the bolt-pistol was ready for action, and marched off toward the Honkie village. There were four or five hundred Honkies in the soapstone huts of the settlement. They were greenish in tint, and while their skin was not in actual plates like insects, it was thick and stiff and really flexible only at the joints. They were solemn-faced and quiet and lived their whole lives in a passionate absorption in their religion, as Boles lived his in devotion to regulations. Boles said that their religion was regulations, and that it made sense.

Then he reached the village. Every house was built of blocks of soapstone, carved to perfection and ornamented with elaborate designs for which Fahnes, at this moment, had no taste. The soapstone, Boles had said, had been brought on Honkie-back for fifty miles or more, just so the village could be built where there was no red clay under the soil to be turned up by an incautious hoe. It had stood here for generations. Perhaps for a thousand years.

He fired. Coruscating flame enveloped the nearest house. There was the roar of suddenly-expanded air and of burning. A second blast of ravening destruction. A third—a fourth!

He saw a few, furtive, fugitive movements. The Honkies in the village had fled.

He fired the flame-gun again from sheer destructiveness, then went snarling into the temple, ready to deal out death to anyone who dared to dispute anything with him.

THE tall Honkie squatted on the ground outside the trading-post, and worriedly mouthed his few words of Terrestrial speech. Boles listened with an air of indignation.

"Your runner caught up to me and brought me back," Boles said dogmatically. "Accordin' to regulations I got to help you out any way I can. But this is bad!"

The Honkie struggled again to convey his meaning in Earth language. Then he fell back upon his own tongue.

"Lord," he said with dignity. "It was the dew-god's doing. We do not understand. The man came through our fields, approaching our village. And this was against the Law, so all our people pretended not see,

lest he be shamed. Yet he had no shame even in breaking the Law. He shouted at us in the fields. He went to the village where again those who were present pretended not to see. Then he took an instrument we know not and struck houses with it, destroying everything."

"A flame-gun," said Boles, scowling. "This is goin' to make trouble. He busted regulations."

"He went into the temple of the dew-god," the worried Honkie chieftain went on with dignified emphasis, "and there are bright stones which look like the dew, save that they also hard, and we carve our bowls and houses with them. But often, because they are like the dew, we give them to the dew-god. The man seemed to desire them greatly. He tore them from the walls of the temple where they are set. And then he saw the inner part of the temple where the dew-god's holiness stays. We had put the most beautiful of the bright stones there, and the dew-god's holiness covered them. But the man desired the stones so greatly that he threw himself into the dew-god's holiness, and he could not endure it. So he died."

"The dew-god's holiness, eh?" said Boles sceptically.

"The dew-god," said the Honkie chief practically, "shakes the dew from our crops before dawn, so that they do not change color and grow uneatable like the wild things of the jungle. One of us, each morning, carries his headdress and blows his horn for him among the crops. As the dew falls from the leaves it hurries to the dew-god's temple. Each morning dew-drops by millions run into his temple and gather in a great, deep gathering which is the holiness of the dew-god. And we place the brightest stones there to welcome them." Boles blinked. Then he jumped.

"Holy?" he cried. "The dew's like a rainstorm, shook off all at once, an' you got a drainage system. Sure! You got a dewpond in the temple! A lake! A swimmin'-pool, full of shook-off dew. An' bright stones were there?"

"Lord, the bright stones are covered by the holiness for a large space," said the Honkie chieftain apologetically. "And the man seemed to desire them greatly. If we had understood, we would have given them to him. We bring them from a great distance, but it is our religion freely to give

one another the things that are most desirable. If it is the custom of men to desire those bright stones, we would surrender them."

BOLES looked at the glittering handful of crystals he had taken from the pockets of Fahnes, after the Honkies had brought him back.

"It ain't worth while," he said vexedly. "They' what man call zircons. They' pretty, but there ain't any value to 'em for trade. They' just hard enough to use as tools to cut soapstones. Fahnes thought they were diamonds, I guess. When he saw a swimming pool carpeted with diamonds on the bottom he went outa his head. He dived for 'em. An' the pool's prob'ly deeper than it looks. He hopped in to grab zircons he thought was diamonds, an' there wasn't any steps like a swimmin'-pool should have, an' he couldn't get out again. So he drowned—on Oryx, where it never rains. Good grief!"

"The dew-god destroyed him because he broke the law," said the Honkie respectfully.

"He died because he was a fool who didn't keep to regulations," said Boles, caustically.

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